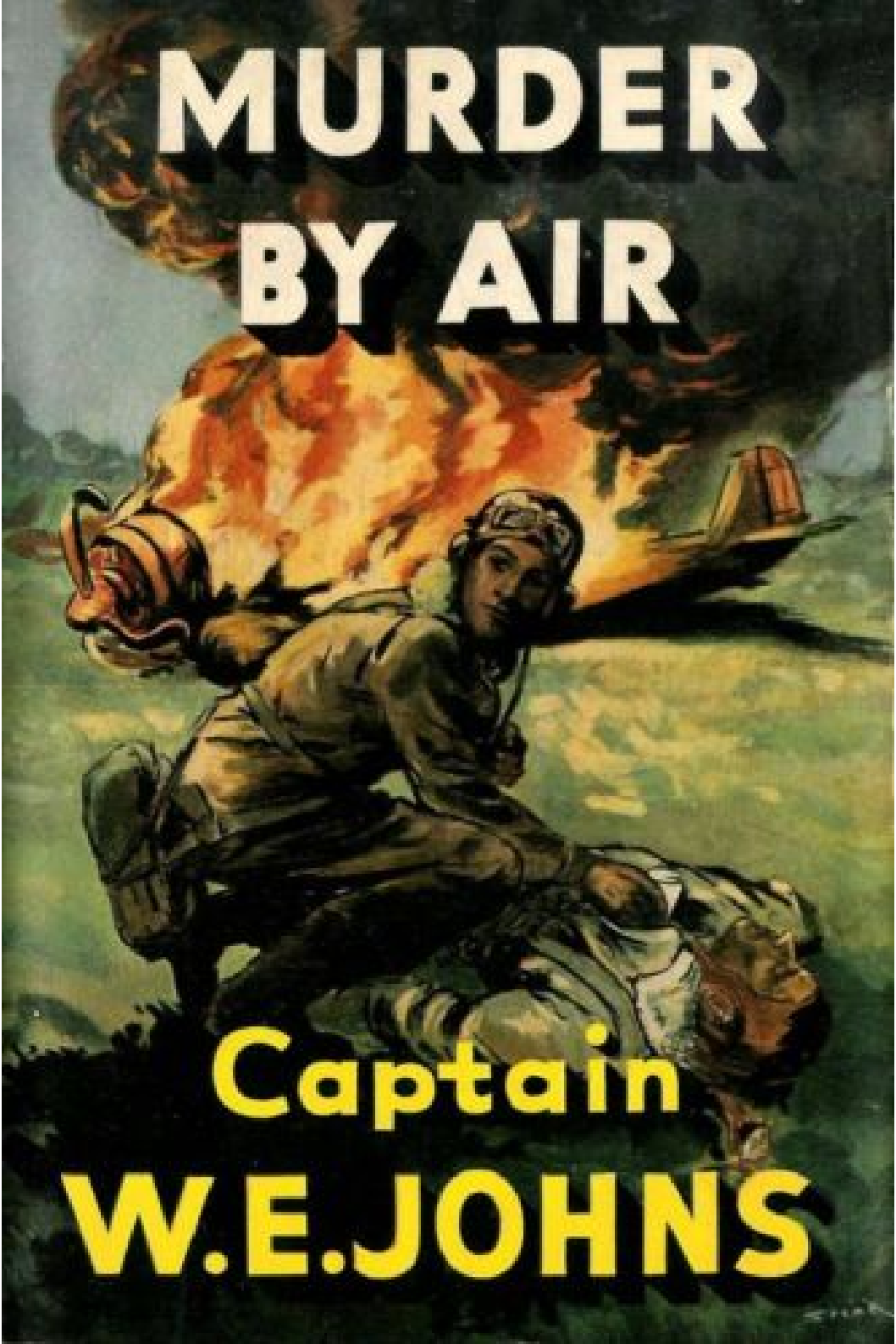
MURDER
BY AIR
Captain
W.E.JOHNS

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MURDER BY AIR

BY

W. E. JOHNS

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CHAPTER I

For the sixth time in less than half an hour I glanced at my watch and then back across the dinner-table at my old friend 'Steeley' Delaroy.

"What's the young beggar doing, I wonder?" I muttered irritably. Then, as a new thought struck me, "I hope he's all right," I added, a hint of alarm creeping into my voice. "He's done a lot of flying lately, just about enough to give him that feeling of false confidence which so often ends in trouble."

Steeley smiled one of his rare smiles. "I shouldn't worry," he said quietly.

"It isn't like Brian to be late."

"Probably detained at the office," suggested Steeley. "Nothing serious happens to you when you're his age. It's when you begin to feel *anno Domini* sitting beside you with his hand on the spare joystick that you develop a sense of discrimination in the matter of risk to life and limb which is really more dangerous than the careless abandon of youth. It's funny, but I've noticed that it often works out that way. He'll turn up in a minute and tell us that he has been hung up on a red-hot news story."

"Possibly," I agreed rather sharply; "but with every other night of the year on which to be late, this, surely, is an occasion when punctuality might have been observed."

And I meant every word I said. Nearly a year had elapsed since Steeley had gone to America at the conclusion of the events narrated in my memoirs under the title of *Steeley Flies Again*, and when he had announced his intention of taking a short holiday in England, with a proposal that we should celebrate the day of his landing with a reunion dinner at the Savoy, both Brian and myself had been delighted. The date had been fixed weeks ahead, and we had looked forward to it eagerly, yet now when the day had arrived he had unaccountably failed to put in an appearance at the appointed time. Seven o'clock had been the arrangement, and here it was nearly eight o'clock, and still he had not turned up.

Steeley and I had lingered over an *apéritif* for half an hour, and then, deciding to wait no longer, had begun our dinner without him. Brian was, as Steeley knew, now a journalist on the staff of a London daily paper, working under a news editor who looked askance at reporters who absented themselves when there was a possibility of a scoop, regardless of hours; but even so. . . .

Glancing up I saw him picking his way quickly through the tables towards us. He was smiling, but I could see at a glance that he was tired,

and, perhaps, a little bit hurt that we had not waited for him.

"And where the devil have *you* been?" I asked curtly, after he had finished pump-handling Steeley's arm. "This isn't seven o'clock."

"I'm well aware of it," he answered, glancing at the clock as he pulled out a chair. "I'm very sorry I'm late, as you should have no difficulty in believing."

"I suppose that wretched paper of yours——"

Brian shook his head. "Nothing to do with the paper," he said simply, reaching for the menu card.

"Not the paper? Then who delayed you?"

"The Coroner."

"Coroner! What Coroner? What are you talking about?"

"I've been on an inquest."

"A nice cheerful prelude to a reunion dinner," observed Steeley whimsically.

"Couldn't help it. I just happened to be on the spot when the poor fellow killed himself. I tried to wangle out of it, but Wayne wouldn't hear of it."

"Wayne?" Steeley glanced up quickly. "It's like old times to hear that name again," he declared. "Don't tell me that you're still mixed up with the police. Is he still at the Yard in charge of the Flying Squad?"

Brian nodded. "He is," he answered, beginning his soup, "and I don't mind telling you that he is a very worried officer, is our old friend Wayne. Well, I wouldn't have his job."

"What has he got to be worried about now that his three arch enemies are respectable citizens?" inquired Steeley, with a ghost of a smile.

I could see that Brian was a trifle subdued, and knew that only something of a serious nature could have depressed his usual high spirits. "What's happened?" I asked. "Don't hurry," I went on quickly. "Take your time; we'll wait for you to catch up." I waved away the waiter who was hovering about in anticipation of our next order.

Brian took a few sips of soup before he replied.

"I can tell you the most extraordinary story you ever heard in your life," he said slowly. "In fact, I should very much like you to hear it, because the answer to the conundrum might be staring me in the face all the time, although I'm dashed if I can see it." He glanced at me out of the corner of a twinkling eye. "You, Tubby, with your abnormally high degree of penetration, might——"

“All right, never mind the rough stuff,” I interrupted curtly. “What’s the problem?”

Brian finished his soup, placed the spoon carefully in the middle of the plate, and then looked up. “Can you think of any reason why a man, on the point of succumbing to a violent death, should choose for his last words a request—or it may have been a warning—to look out for a white dog?”

“Maybe he had just had trouble with such an animal,” I suggested.

“Impossible. He died in an aeroplane crash, having been in the air for at least two hours immediately prior to the accident. There aren’t any dogs up topsides—at least, I’ve never seen any, and I don’t want to.”

“Come on, let’s have the whole story,” requested Steeley. “This sounds rather interesting.”

“O.K., chief, as you say in the States,” smiled Brian. “This was the way of it, then. As you may have heard, I still do a fair amount of flying, and so does Tubby here, for that matter. He’s got his own Puss Moth which I borrow occasionally, but more often I hire a club machine. My paper calls me their flying correspondent, which looks well in print—but that’s by the way.

“I do most of my flying down at the West Sussex Club, of which I am a member, but as we’re old friends I might as well say at once that it is not entirely a desire to aviate that takes me so far afield when there are plenty of good clubs nearer London. You, Steeley, will be interested to know that someone is following in your criminal footsteps. Smuggling in a big way is rampant, but not little silk stockings, such as you used to import. No *sir*. Dope is the cargo. And that’s not all, although just how far the ramifications of these pernicious pilots extend is not yet known. For example, cosmopolitan crooks are getting into the country with remarkable ease and without going through the immigration officials; likewise, they are getting out of it.”

“Someone flying them in and out, eh?” I suggested.

“Of course. There’s no other way. Only the other day an old lag who stepped out of Wormwood Scrubs about breakfast time was reported to the Yard by the Marseilles police before six the same evening. He was seen drinking in the *Deux Choux*, in the Canabière. They picked him up, of course, but as his papers were in order, showing that he had passed through the regular surface-craft channels, they had to let him go again. The same sort of thing has been going on all over the place, and it’s making the people at the Yard scratch their heads, I can tell you. I’m down there a lot, covering their stuff for my paper, so, knowing Wayne, I hear what’s going on,

although at present mum's the word. He and Raymond, the Assistant Commissioner, have realised that these people are flying, but to find out how, and with whom, is proving a good deal more difficult than at first they supposed it was going to be. It has come to this. Unless Wayne does something about it pretty soon, he's likely to lose his job."

"What has he done about it—anything?" inquired Steeley.

"He's done all he could, but his best hasn't turned out to be a very successful effort. He actually honoured me by asking for my advice, and I, bearing in mind the maxim you so often expounded in the old days—that it takes an aeroplane to catch an aeroplane—suggested that he should go in for a spot of aviation himself. Well, he did. He engaged an ex-R.A.F pilot named Brance, bought him an aeroplane, gave him a beat on the south coast, and told him to keep an eye on the movements of aircraft. Matter of fact, he offered the job to me, but I wouldn't leave the paper. Nice fellow, was Brance."

"Was?"

"Yes. He isn't any more. He was killed two days ago."

"How did it happen?" asked Steeley, becoming really interested.

"That's what I'm about to tell you," continued Brian. "Brance made his headquarters at the West Sussex Club. Now you know why I've been hanging about there; if there was a story going I wanted to be the first on the spot. As it happens I was, but not in the way I had hoped. Brance and I got on pretty well, the acquaintanceship no doubt being due, in the first place, to the fact that I was friendly with Wayne and knew what was in the wind."

"How long was Brance on the job?" asked Steeley.

"About six weeks."

"Did he discover anything?"

"Nothing at all—at least, not up to last Thursday, when he took off in his Gipsy Moth on what was to be his last patrol. I was hanging about on the tarmac. It wasn't a nice day—windy, with occasional rain and a lot of low cloud about. He took off about three in the afternoon. When it got to somewhere around six o'clock, and he hadn't come back, I knew he must be down somewhere, because that was beyond the limit of the petrol he was carrying. Actually he had a maximum endurance of about two and a half hours. I waited for a few minutes, thinking he might ring up, but when he didn't I took off to see if I could see any sign of him. I wasn't long finding the crash. He was down on the edge of some rough timber near a stretch of open land not far from the New Forest. I knew it was a bad crack up before I got to it, and it was. I managed to get down in a big field. There was nobody

else there, which wasn't surprising, for it's a pretty desolate stretch of country. There's no need for me to go into details. He was still strapped in his seat, and at first I thought he was dead, but he wasn't—not quite. Somehow I managed to get him out of the mess on to the grass, and I was just going off for help when he opened his eyes and looked at me—quite sanely. He seemed to be trying to say something, so I ran back and knelt down beside him. Poor Brance! I could almost *feel* how hard he was trying to speak, but the words wouldn't come. In the end he managed to get out one or two. 'Brian,' he said, 'mind the dog—the white dog.' That was all, but the fact that he used my name shows that he was perfectly conscious. He tried—my God, how he tried—to say something else, but he was too far gone, and died in my arms. I didn't wait any longer. I ran to the nearest road, which was some distance away, stopped a car, and asked the driver to ring up for an ambulance from the nearest call-box."

"So that's the story, eh?" murmured Steeley reflectively, drawing invisible pencil lines on the tablecloth with his fork.

"It isn't quite all," went on Brian quickly, and I could see that he had been a bit shaken by his nasty experience. "The Coroner's verdict this evening was 'Death from Misadventure,' the cause of death being due to a fractured skull. No one, not even Wayne or the doctor, seemed to think that there was anything unusual in the fact that it was the back of his skull that was smashed."

Steeley's eyes flickered up to Brian's face. "Is that so?" he said softly.

"It is so," went on Brian. "You've had more experience of crashes than I have, but the question my common sense keeps asking me is, how can a man fracture the back of his skull when, according to all the laws of gravity, he should be flung *forward* when he hits the ground?"

Steeley nodded. "Yes," he said, "you're quite right. It's the front that takes the crack every time." He turned to me. "Remember the old Camel, Tubby, how we used to bind padding over the rear ends of the guns to save our faces in case of a crash?" He looked back at Brian. "What has Wayne got to say about all this?" he asked.

"I don't really know," answered Brian. "He's like a man bemused. I think he feels that there's something wrong somewhere, but he can't make out what it is. He won't have it that Brance said anything about a dog; says what he probably said was, 'the white *fog*.' "

"You're certain that it was 'dog'?"

"Absolutely. In the mental stress of such moments one's senses are more alert than usual. I can hear him saying the words now."

“There was a lot of cloud about, don’t forget.”

“I know all about that; but it doesn’t alter the fact. ‘White fog’ doesn’t sound a natural thing to say, anyway. Fog usually is white, at least, away from big cities. If the word fog is qualified, ninety-nine times in a hundred the adjective is ‘thick.’ Over London you might get a black fog, but anywhere else a fog is—well, just a fog, or possibly a thick fog.”

Steeley nodded approvingly. “That’s sound argument,” he acknowledged.

“Put yourself, as a pilot, in Brance’s place,” continued Brian. “Suppose you had occasion to refer to fog; can you imagine yourself warning anyone against a *white* fog? You might say, look out for a blue fog, or a green fog, if you saw such a phenomenon, otherwise you’d just use the unqualified word ‘fog,’ because it would naturally be assumed to be white.”

“I quite agree with you,” confessed Steeley. “Poor Brance must have seen a white dog.”

“In his heart I think Wayne thinks so, too; but it raises such a problem that he prefers not to face it,” muttered Brian. “But it’s on his conscience. He wanted to talk the matter over with me again to-night, but I told him I was dining with you, and that as I was already late it would have to wait until to-morrow.”

“Apparently you told him where we were dining, too,” I suggested.

“Matter of fact, I did. How did you know?”

“Here he comes now.”

The others followed the direction of my eyes. Wayne, who was staring about obviously looking for someone, spotted us at the same moment and hurried across.

“So here you are,” he said, looking from one to the other. “I was looking for you.”

“Not for the first time, eh?” smiled Steeley pointedly. “Well, well, here we are again. Sit down, Wayne, and have a bite to eat.”

“Not me. I’ve something else to do,” declared Wayne heavily.

“The trouble with you, Wayne, is that you take life much too seriously,” said Steeley reproachfully. “You’d better have something.”

“All right, then, thanks. I’ll have a steak, with a can of beer.”

“That’s the idea; you can tell us about it while you eat.”

“Tell you about it? About what?”

“What you came here to tell us about, of course. You’re not going to ask us to believe that you came here just for the pleasure of seeing us?”

The detective settled himself down in his chair. “You’re quite right,” he said gloomily. “Has Brian told you about this business of Brance?”

“Yes, we were just talking about it.”

“What do you make of it?”

“I’ve hardly had time to think about it yet.”

“Funny business. Something fishy somewhere.”

“Very odd. I suppose you haven’t picked up any more information—clues—since Brian left you?”

“Matter of fact, I have picked up a thread or two,” admitted Wayne.

“Go ahead,” invited Steeley. “I’m listening. But don’t expect me to solve the problem sitting here. My business used to be *setting* problems for the police, not solving them.”

“Yes, I know,” replied Wayne grimly, “and it’s because you’ve done a bit of—what shall we say?—unorthodox flying, that it struck me you might see the thing from an altogether different angle.”

Steeley tapped a cigarette reflectively on the back of his hand, a glimmer of a smile hovering about the corners of his mouth at Wayne’s covert reference to his illegal flying activities. “Well, what have you discovered?” he asked.

“Only this,” answered Wayne. “I think I can follow Brance’s movements last Thursday pretty closely. He left Sparling Aerodrome, which is the headquarters of the West Sussex Club, at three-five. That’s definite. He was clocked out by the ground engineer and a note made in the book. The same man saw him fly off in a westerly direction along the coast, and he was still heading the same way when he went up through the clouds. At three-twenty a coastguard on the cliffs at Hoyle heard a machine pass over him. I might say that all coastguards have been asked to keep an eye open for aircraft. This fellow couldn’t see the machine because of the cloud, but he could hear it, and he’s prepared to swear that the machine was a light plane, and that it was flying due west. He looked at his watch, and, as I have said, the time was three-twenty. As that would be the time that Brance would pass over Hoyle had he continued flying west after leaving Sparling, it’s fairly safe to conclude it was him. Very well; now listen to this.

“Brance—we’ll assume it was he—had hardly been out of earshot ten minutes when the coastguard heard him coming back; the sound increased rapidly in volume, as if the pilot was coming down with his engine full on. The noise was much louder. Furthermore, Graves—that’s the coastguard—said it had a sort of ventriloquial effect, like an echo, making it difficult to locate. For this reason he isn’t very clear about the movements of the

machine for the next minute or two, but when he last heard it, it was heading directly inland, that is, due north. He's sure of that, and he stood listening until it was out of earshot. When he got to his station he made a note of the incident while it was still fresh in his mind, as aircraft detection now forms part of his job. Naturally, he knew nothing about Brance being killed, but as soon as he heard about the crash, which occurred about twenty miles north-north-west of where he had heard a machine, he sent in his report."

"And that's all you know, eh?" asked Steeley.

"Yes, that's the lot."

"All right. Now, let's consider the evidence, and see if we can find any weak places in it," suggested Steeley. "Brance took off at three-five with enough petrol to keep him in the air for two and a half hours. That means that, unless he refuelled somewhere, which seems very unlikely, he would have to come down at five-thirty-five. That was the outside limit of the machine's endurance. Very well. What time did you take off to look for him, Brian?"

"Just after six."

"Be as accurate as you can."

"That's as near as I can tell you. I reckoned that Brance must have been on the ground for at least half an hour when I took off."

"It wasn't *before* six?"

"Definitely not. I heard the village clock strike the hour while I was sitting on a chock in front of the hangar."

"And how long were you finding the crash?"

"About twenty minutes."

"So the time when you landed beside it could not possibly have been earlier than twenty-five minutes past six?"

"That's correct."

"You went into the crash?"

"I had to, to get Brance out."

"Did you come in contact with the engine?"

"Yes; I had to get over it to get to the cockpit."

"Did you notice if it was hot?"

"Yes, it was."

"Very hot?"

"Yes. It made me jump when I put my hand on it."

“But we know for certain that the machine must have been on the ground for fifty minutes; surely it would have cooled down in that time?”

Brian frowned. “You’re not suggesting——” he began, but Steeley cut him short.

“I’m not suggesting anything, Brian,” he said. “I’m trying to establish facts. You say the engine was still very hot; you know the difference between hot and cold, so we must accept your statement that the engine *was* hot. That being so, I must point out that the two things are hard to reconcile—the machine being on the ground at five-thirty-five, yet its engine was still hot at six-twenty-five, on a day when quite a chilly wind was blowing. Tell me, Brian, did you happen to notice if the main tank was smashed?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did you see any petrol about?”

“I didn’t notice any.”

“There was quite a drop of petrol left in both the main and the gravity tanks, if that’s what you’re trying to get at,” put in Wayne quickly. “It is noted in the Air Ministry Inspector of Accident’s report.”

“Why, then the machine must have been down well before five-thirty-five,” cried Steeley. “Which makes the mystery of the hot engine still more inexplicable. What does that suggest to you, Wayne?”

“There is only one possible explanation. The machine must have landed, and stood on the ground for some time before it was flown off again.”

“Precisely! It seems to me that your job is to find out where it landed. When you have done that, you’ll be well on the trail of the man who murdered Brance.”

Wayne stared. “So you think he was murdered?”

“I don’t think he was the victim of an accident.”

“What would your theory be in reconstructing the affair?”

Steeley was silent for a few moments. Then, “I should say the thing went something like this,” he answered. “I think we can safely say that the machine your coastguard heard was Brance’s Moth. First he heard him fly over, then he heard him coming back, but I should say he was wrong about him coming down. It is more likely that the increased noise was due to the fact that there were two machines, which, by the way, would account for the curious echo he speaks of. Brance saw the other machine coming up from the south, turned back to look at it, and then followed it inland. He saw it land and came down beside it, whereupon the other pilot—or a confederate

—struck him on the back of the head, knocking him out and inflicting the injury from which he afterwards died. I——”

“Wait a minute—wait a minute,” interrupted Wayne. “Brance couldn’t have got back into his machine and flown it away after his skull was broken.”

“I didn’t for one moment suggest that he could,” retorted Steeley quietly. “There was nothing to prevent the other fellow from putting him back in his seat, flying him to another field some distance away, and then opening the throttle of his machine, was there?”

Wayne stared at Steeley with an odd expression on his face, and he deserved credit for his next remark. “You know, Steeley,” he said, “you ought to be doing my job, not me.”

Steeley waved the compliment aside. “It’s possible that law-breaking develops a keener eye for detail than police-training,” he observed.

“There’s just one more thing I’d like you to tell me,” blurted Wayne in his awkward, direct manner. “Although this is, I know, asking rather a lot. Accepting your theory of Brance’s last flight, how would you set about finding the man who struck him?”

“I don’t think there should be anything very difficult about that,” answered Steeley casually. “All you have to do is to go through the register of private owners of aircraft until you find one who owns a white dog.”

There was a long silence during which, with his eyes on the floor, Wayne filled his pipe in the slow, deliberate manner that was his habit. When he had finished, regardless of where he was, he lighted it and sent a cloud of pungent smoke curling upwards. “I suppose,” he said in a low voice, removing the pipe from his mouth and gazing into the bowl, “I suppose it wouldn’t interest you fellows to—er—try to find this cove who flies aeroplanes and owns a white dog?”

“On the old principle of set a thief to catch a thief, eh?” bantered Steeley.

Wayne flushed scarlet. “I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort,” he growled.

“No, I know, I was only pulling your leg.” Steeley caught my eye; then he threw a quick glance at Brian, who nodded without any attempt at subterfuge. Then he looked at Wayne. “Matter of fact, I think it might provide us with some good, healthy, mental exercise, to say nothing of a spot of aviation with a definite object.”

Wayne rose to his feet “That’s fine,” he declared. “I’ll get back and tell Colonel Raymond.” Then a slow smile spread over his face. “To tell you the truth, it was he who sent me here to put the proposition to you.”

CHAPTER II

STEELEY never did allow grass to grow under his feet, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that he didn't believe in allowing his propellers to idle, and noon the following day saw the three of us at Sparling, whither we had flown in my Puss Moth for the purpose of inspecting the scene of the crash, after a short interview at Scotland Yard with Colonel Raymond.

He greeted Steeley like an old friend rather than an erstwhile enemy, and the situation was not without its humour when he wished him as much success in his efforts on the side of the law as he had enjoyed whilst opposed to it. Apart from promising us any support that was within his power to give, he had only one morsel of news to impart, and he offered it because, as he said, there might be a hook-up with the crime we had been asked to investigate, if, in fact, Brance's death was indeed a crime.

It appeared that two nights previously a robbery had been committed in the City, the actual job being the blowing open of a safe in the offices of an insurance company in Lombard Street. An examination of the safe, as is often the case, revealed the crime to have been the handiwork of a specialist whose methods were well known to the Yard; in this instance the gentleman obviously responsible was one "Flash" Slade, the soubriquet presumably having some connection with his partiality for nitroglycerine as a means of opening doors rather than the more laborious method of using drills. A quick overhaul of the safe-breaker's usual haunts, however, produced a surprising impasse for the police, when they were informed with engaging frankness by the burglar's wife that Flash was not even in England, but was taking a holiday in Berlin. She even gave them his address in the German capital, which telephonic communication with the police of that city proved to be correct. Further investigation provided the astonishing news that not only had Flash been in Berlin for a week, his papers proving that he had travelled by the usual tourist route, but on the night in question he had been with a party of friends, admittedly of questionable character, in a well-known night club. Faced with this cast-iron alibi, the police were compelled to mark time, not knowing which avenue to explore next; which did not, however, prevent Colonel Raymond and Inspector Wayne, both of whom had had some experience of flying, from forming their own opinions as to the way the apparent miracle had been achieved.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff to me," Raymond had declared at the interview. "As soon as he had done his job Flash raced off in his car to some prearranged rendezvous, where, after handing over the swag to a confederate, he was picked up by an aeroplane. A few hours later he was

unloaded in a field near Berlin, from which he was taken by another car to the club where a party had already foregathered for the purpose of providing him with an alibi. His papers are, of course, forgeries. The job in the City was done between two and three in the morning. The Flying Squad was on the spot at six-thirty, and I was talking to the Berlin police at half-past seven. At eight o'clock Flash was certainly in the Berlin club, as drunk as if he had spent the night there. I don't believe in miracles. There was only one way he could have got there in the time, and that was by air. And he didn't fly himself. Flash is no pilot. All of which leads me to think that this flying racket is a big, well-oiled organisation with brains and money behind it."

Steeley was very quiet as we drove down to Brooklands, where I kept my machine, also during the flight to Sparling, so I assumed that Raymond's story had given him food for thought. But he seemed to dismiss the matter as we got out, and went into the Club as Brian's guests for lunch. And I must say I was glad of it, for the weather was far from pleasant; the air was choppy, and a layer of cloud formed an opaque ceiling at about two thousand feet.

As soon as we had finished our coffee Steeley was on his feet again, anxious to go on. "Come on," he said with a sort of grim humour. "You must have read enough books to know that the first thing to be done in a case like this is to visit the scene of the tragedy."

In twenty minutes, with Brian at the joystick, we were there. Steeley made him circle round once or twice at different altitudes before he would allow him to land, but if the survey yielded anything of interest, he did not disclose it.

As we ran to a stop not far from where a heap of broken branches and an area of trampled ground marked the site of the crash—for the actual wreck had, of course, been removed—Steeley laid his hand on Brian's arm. "Don't taxi any nearer," he said. "We'll get out here. Tell me, where did you land on the day Brance was killed?"

"In just about the same spot as we are now, as near as makes no difference," answered Brian. "The wind was in the same quarter."

"I see," replied Steeley, stepping out on to the soft turf, which, like that so often found near rough timber, was short and dead-looking, the result of years of depredations by rabbits; here and there a tangle of briar curled out of it, and one or two tall thistles stood upright like spires, that was all. Generally speaking, the ground was flat; but in the near distance it fell away in undulating sweeps on which gorse and bracken grew in large, straggling clumps. Brian was quite right when he said it was a deserted-looking spot.

The ground was still soft from the recent rains, and after walking up and down a few times we were able to find the exact spot on which his machine had stood when he had run forward to help Brance in the crashed machine. The trail of the dragging tail-skid, which here and there had broken through the thin turf, was plain, and the wheel-marks, while not so clearly defined, could be seen distinctly.

"What machine were you flying, Brian?" asked Steeley.

"A Gipsy Moth."

"The same as Brance's?"

"Yes."

Steeley nodded, and with his feet placed one before the other, he measured the wheel-track. Curiously enough he did not seem particularly interested in the actual spot on which the crash had occurred. Instead, he stood for some minutes looking up and down the field, as if he was wrestling with some abstruse problem. "Now, Brian," he said at last, "I want you to try to visualise the crash just as it was when you approached it, and tell me in which direction the tail was pointing."

"It was pointing pretty well straight up in the air," answered Brian promptly.

"Very well; then how was the engine lying? I mean, imagine that the crankshaft was extended indefinitely towards the rear, and point in the direction of the extension."

Brian ran across to the spot where the machine had struck, looked at it for a moment or two, then raised his arm and pointed. "That way," he said.

With his eyes on the ground Steeley began to walk slowly in the direction indicated, and in this way covered perhaps a hundred yards, when he suddenly quickened his pace; then, turning at right angles, he made a swift measurement with his feet. As Brian and I joined him, he pointed to the ground. "Look," he said, in his quiet, restrained manner. "It was from here that Brance's machine started on its last flight."

Following his pointed finger, I saw two clearly defined wheel-marks with the rear of the tail-skid midway between them. Thereafter it was not a difficult task to follow the track of the ill-fated machine from the time its wheels had first touched the ground. After landing it had taxied round in a wide circle back nearly to the place where its wheels had first touched; sometimes the wheel-marks were almost invisible, but we could always see the track of the skid; finally, a perfectly straight track, becoming fainter and fainter until it was lost altogether, marked the course of the machine as it

had rushed towards the trees, obviously without any hope of clearing them. The track pointed directly to the place where the crash had occurred.

There was a sparkle of triumph in Steeley's eyes as the silent story unfolded itself. "It looks as if our hypothesis was not far off the mark," he observed. It was like him to say "our" when he should really have said "my."

"Yes" I agreed, "this is the field in which poor Brance landed before he was killed."

"I fancy it would be more accurate to say that this is the field *on which he was landed* after he had been struck on the head," declared Steeley. "Either way, someone else must have been here. Let's see if we can discover what sort of vehicle he arrived in; it shouldn't be difficult. The absence of roads rules out anything except an aeroplane, in which case the direction of the wind must narrow considerably the area to be surveyed."

He was, of course, quite right. As an aeroplane must land directly into the wind, there was no need for us to waste time looking in those parts of the field that were out of alignment with its direction, which had already been established by the tail of Brance's Moth.

As it turned out it proved to be a longer job than we expected, and it took us nearly an hour to find the first sign of the third machine which had landed in the field on the fatal day; the first being Brance's Moth, and the second, Brian's Moth. In fact, I doubt if we should have found the wheel-marks we were searching for had it not been for a few drops of burnt engine oil which I happened to discover. Clearly, a vehicle of some sort had rested there, and once the spot was found, it was just possible to make out the two grooves where the wheels had pressed into the turf. There was no landing track, and the tail-skid had left no mark.

Steeley studied the meagre sign with brooding eyes. "We're on delicate ground here," he said at length. "The outstanding fact is, that the machine which stood here has a wheel-track a good deal wider than the Moth. We had better measure it; it may help us to establish the type. I may be wrong, but the absence of clearly defined wheel-marks leads me to think that either the machine was very lightly loaded or else the tyres and tail-skid were very broad, possibly both. Tyres with a wide tread, or balloon tyres not fully inflated, would not leave the same clean imprint as the tyres of a Moth, which are fairly narrow and usually kept hard. The fact that the tail-skid has not cut the turf suggests that it was fitted with a broader shoe than the other."

"What about a tail-wheel?" suggested Brian. "That would account for the fact that the turf is not even torn at what must have been turning-points,

because the wheel turns with the machine."

"Good for you," cried Steeley. "Perceive the truth of the old adage about two heads being better than one. I must confess that I had forgotten the existence of such things as tail-wheels. Hello! what's this?" He dropped on his hands and knees, and stared at the ground a little to one side of the oil spots.

I hurried over to him, but there seemed little to get excited about; all I could see was a group of small, round holes, each about half an inch across, scattered at irregular intervals over an area of about a yard.

Steeley took a pencil from his pocket and dropped it into one of the holes; it went down about an inch and then stopped as if it was resting on a firm base. A quick trial showed that the others were about the same depth. "What do you make of those?" he asked, looking up at me.

I shook my head. "Don't ask me," I replied.

"Can you think of any part of an aircraft that could make such a mark?"

"I can't."

"Do you know of an animal or insect that could make such holes?"

"No," I confessed, "I don't."

Presently, searching a little farther afield, Brian found another, but after a cursory glance at it Steeley returned to the group, which he studied in silence for some seconds before beginning a close scrutiny of the turf around them. His patience was rewarded, for a moment later he picked up a cigarette stub. It was only a fragment, almost burnt out, and bore no brand name, and after glancing at it he tossed it aside. "Sherlock Holmes, who, if I remember rightly, made a special study of these things, would, of course, have been able to tell you from what part of the world the smoker came," he remarked dryly. "In the same way he would no doubt have collected the oil spots on his handkerchief and have them analysed with a view to determining which of the many brands of lubricating oil was favoured by the pilot. Not being Sherlock Holmes, I've neither the time nor facilities for the microscopic examination of such trifles, but you might hunt around, you two, and see if you can find a match-stick."

We searched for some time, but in vain, and then returned to the Puss Moth.

"I don't think we need stay here any longer," observed Steeley thoughtfully. "We've done our stuff in accordance with the best traditions of detective fiction, so we might as well go back to Sparling for a cup of tea."

“Aren’t you going to look at the place where the machine crashed?” asked Brian.

“I don’t think so,” replied Steeley casually. “I can’t imagine that the people who killed Brance would go anywhere near it; they’d take off and get away as quickly as possible in case anyone—a game-keeper, for instance—happened to arrive on the scene, so all we could hope to find would be the foot-marks of the police, ambulance men, or the mechanics who moved the wreck. Come on, let’s get along.”

“Just a minute,” I suggested. “It occurs to me that weather conditions are very much as they were last Thursday. Further, it must have been at about this time that Brance was killed. Do you remember, Steeley, how in France both we and the Boche got into a sort of habit of doing patrols at the same time; the Boche in particular did their shows with a time-table regularity that often enabled us to waylay them? Surely there’s just a chance, even if it’s only a remote one, that the fellow who crashed Brance, if he is flying regularly, might come over at about this time?”

Steeley took out his cigarette-case, glancing up at the cloud-covered sky as he did so. “Yes, I think you’re right,” he agreed. “There is just a chance that he might come over, and in a show like this any chance, however small, is worth taking. Let’s stand by for a little while.”

We waited for half an hour, listening intently, but except for the soughing of the wind in the trees, and an occasional cry of a wild-fowl, we heard nothing, and at last Steeley climbed into the cockpit. “I don’t think there’s much point in waiting any longer,” he said.

He taxied to the far end of the sward, and then swung round into the wind. For a moment he paused with his hand on the throttle, peering at the bulwark of trees that lay like a dark cliff across our path at the far side of the field. “It was from this spot that Brance’s machine charged the trees on full throttle,” he said grimly, as he eased the lever forward.

Instinctively we glanced down as he soared up over the broken and battered branches where Brance’s machine had struck them, and at that moment in my heart was born a resolute determination to leave no stone unturned to bring his murderer to justice.

Steeley held the Puss down for a minute or two just below the cloud, then, after diving a little for extra speed, he zoomed up through it. Above, it was like another world; the sun shone brightly from a turquoise sky on a fleecy, white-topped cloud-bank that rolled away, mile after mile, on every side to the distant horizon. For a little while he continued to climb, heading in a southerly direction, his dark, inscrutable eyes gazing steadily through

the windscreen, studying the sky section by section with a thoroughness born of long experience. Suddenly he started, and his left hand gripped my knee. “There he is,” he said in a tense whisper.

Far away to the south, a pin-point of light had flashed; it was gone instantly, leaving nothing to mark its position, but we both knew that it could only have been caused by the sunlight catching the wings of a banking aeroplane.

A minute later we could see the machine, a tiny speck against the blue, and by that time Steeley had swung round into the sun and was climbing steeply for height. He seemed to do it quite automatically. The pilot of the other machine might be a perfectly harmless individual, but while there was a chance that he was the fellow we were looking for, I agreed with Steeley that it would be better to remain undiscovered, if possible. Our only hope of doing that was by placing ourselves between him and the sun; already it was far down towards the line where the white cloud cut into the blue, and the glare of it was more than human eyes could face.

Steeley glanced at me, a queer half smile on his lips. “Like old times,” he murmured.

“If this is the man who killed Brance, I should feel happier if we had a gun,” I answered bluntly.

He said no more, but concentrated on stalking his quarry, which, although we could not see the ground, we knew must be far out to sea. We had first seen it at an altitude that could not have been less than ten thousand feet, but as it approached the land it began to lose height rapidly.

“Gliding over the coast with his engine off, just as I used to,” muttered Steeley, without taking his eyes from the other machine. “What do you make it out to be?”

“Looks like a Hawk,” I answered.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” was his crisp reply, as he began to turn slowly to follow the stranger, who was now passing straight across our nose.

It was a queer sensation, this deliberately stalking another machine, and it awakened something in me that had long been dormant, forgotten. We allowed the Hawk—for there was no longer any doubt about the type—to get a good two miles ahead and then chased along in its slipstream.

The pursuit was of short duration. Another ten minutes and the Hawk put its nose down into the billowing cloud-tops and disappeared from sight. Steeley did the same thing. For a few seconds we raced blindly through a semi-opaque world of grey shadows and then emerged into the dim, dreary world beneath, with the ground not more than a thousand feet below.

I saw the other machine at once; it was already on the ground, in a large pasture, taxying quickly towards a group of trees behind which a dilapidated-looking ruin stood in forlorn isolation. There was no need for me to point it out to Steeley, for I could see that he had already seen it. In fact, somewhat to my alarm, he throttled back and began to side-slip down with the obvious intention of landing in the same field.

I saw the Hawk stop, as if the pilot had suddenly heard us, and then go on again.

"What are you going to do?" I asked Steeley, a trifle nervously.

"I'm going down," he answered tersely.

"Don't forget this may be the fellow who killed Brance," I warned him.

"There are three of us here now, and he may find that a more difficult proposition," was his casual retort.

Two quick "S" turns, and the Puss touched its wheels on the pasture; swinging round gradually at the end of his run, Steeley brought it to a standstill not twenty yards from the other machine, which had stopped in front of a long, low, ramshackle building that stood just within the trees and looked as if it might be a cowshed, for the ground around it was bare, as if it had been trampled by many hooves.

"Brian, stay in the machine and keep your head down," ordered Steeley. "Watch everything, but don't be seen." Then he opened the door and jumped to the ground. I followed, just as the door of the Hawk was opened from the inside and a girl stepped out.

To say that I was surprised would be to put it mildly. So convinced had I become during the chase that we were on the trail of Brance's murderer that, although I was not quite sure in my mind just what sort of pilot I expected to see, it was certainly not a girl, and I stared at her with the wind knocked clean out of my sails, as the saying is.

She closed the cabin door behind her and stood regarding us with questioning eyes. Tall, good-looking in a rather powerful way, from the soles of her high-heeled shoes to the tips of her painted finger-nails she was as smart as anything that had ever been turned out by a Parisian dressmaker.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong with your machine?" she asked pleasantly in a rich contralto voice.

"Why, no," answered Steeley awkwardly, walking towards her. "I thought it was the other way about. I saw you going down rather sharply, as if you had no choice in the matter, and knowing that there was no aerodrome hereabouts I followed you down to make sure that you were all right. When

I saw you in this field I assumed, naturally, that you had made a forced landing."

"Oh, no," was the quick reply. "I live not far away, and I often use this field as an emergency landing-ground. Thanks all the same."

At that she would have ended the conversation, for she turned away, but Steeley followed her closely. "Smart machine you've got," he observed admiringly, as his eyes ran over the neat lines of the Hawk, which was painted pale blue all over, picked out with gold.

"Yes," she returned—rather stiffly, I thought, as if she suspected that Steeley was trying to take advantage of the situation to cultivate an acquaintanceship.

Steeley put out his hand to open the cabin door, but in a flash she had barred his path. "Please," she said coldly.

Frankly, I thought myself that he was going a bit too far; we had obviously made a boob, and the least we could do was withdraw gracefully. But not Steeley.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I'd rather you didn't touch my machine," was the curt answer.

"Well, that's the first time in my life that another pilot has said that to me," said Steeley stiffly. "Anyone would think you had a secret to hide inside. But never mind, we'll get along, if you feel like that. By the way, if you've just come from the east, you might tell us what the weather is like farther along the coast; it seems to be thickening."

"Certainly," lied the girl easily. "I've just come that way." I say "lied," because she had certainly come from the south, not the east.

Steeley's next words made me hold my breath. "Thanks," he said, with just a suspicion of sarcasm in his voice. "And what was the weather like at Berck?" Berck is, of course, on the north coast of France.

The girl hesitated for an instant. It was only momentary, but it showed that Steeley's arrow had hit its mark.

"What makes you think I've come from France?" she asked haughtily.

"Because I saw you coming straight across the Channel," Steeley told her frankly. "You know, when an aeroplane arrives in this country from abroad, it is usual to land at a Customs airport," he reminded her gently.

The girl looked at the ground, biting her lower lip with vexation. "All right, then," she said quickly, as if she had suddenly reached a decision. "I'll tell you the truth; you look a good sort, and I don't think you'll give me away. I *have* come from France, and I have a very good reason for not

landing at a Customs aerodrome. I've brought somebody with me, a very dear friend I picked up on the Riviera, and who I certainly did not want to pine away in a quarantine station. *Now* do you understand?"

As she spoke she threw open the cabin door of her machine and called a name that sounded like Jim.

A dog appeared in the doorway. For a moment it stood there wagging its tail at its mistress, then it jumped lightly to the ground. It was a rough-haired fox terrier without a trace of black or tan on its snow-white coat.

CHAPTER III

I DON'T know about the others, but for me it was certainly a difficult moment. At first, as I stared at the animal, I felt the blood draining from my face, so I lit a cigarette quickly, holding the match in my cupped hands before my face to conceal my embarrassment.

Steeley's next words eased the tension. "Well, well," he smiled calmly. "Is that all? My dear lady, I don't blame you; I'm afraid I should do the same thing in similar circumstances, and I can only apologise for my unwarrantable intrusion in your affairs." With that he made a neat little bow, turned on his heel, and walked back to the Puss. After what I hoped was a friendly nod I followed him.

Not a word was spoken as we taxied to the far end of the field to get enough run for a take off, or as we zoomed up over the cowshed. It was not until we had banked round and were heading east for Sparling that Steeley disclosed what he was thinking. Then he looked at me with that queer, whimsical smile of his. "Nice little dog," he said.

"Yes," I agreed. "I wonder what else there was in the cabin."

"Ah! That's what I would like to know."

"Why didn't you have a look?"

"Because, Tubby, old son, the moment was not propitious for the pursuance of inquiries."

"Why not?"

"Because, although you don't appear to have realised it, you were standing nearer to Old Man Death than you've ever stood in your life before."

“What!” I ejaculated.

“You didn’t see the machine-gun pointing at us through the ventilation hole in the brickwork of the cowshed?”

“You’re joking,” I expostulated.

“Indeed I’m not. I’ve seen enough machine-guns to recognise one when I see it, although I must admit that I didn’t spot it until I had raised the subject of Customs airports; if I had, maybe I should have held my tongue. One false move after that and we should have been wiped out by the mere pressure of a finger on a trigger.”

“Good God!” I gasped.

“Did you see the gun, Brian?” asked Steeley.

“I saw something, but I thought it was a rifle barrel,” replied Brian. “I was watching the shed while you were talking; there was something about it that I didn’t like the look of.”

“You’d like the look of the inside still less, I’ll warrant,” declared Steeley, as he cut the throttle and began to glide down towards the aerodrome.

“But what’s the idea of the dog?” I demanded. “What on earth——”

“Purely a blind, I should say,” broke in Steeley. “Don’t you see the idea? If the worst came to the worst, the presence of the dog would always account for irregular behaviour such as the avoidance of international regulations about landing. Nine people out of ten, even excise officers, would be taken in by it, and not bother to examine the machine farther. The penalty for smuggling a dog would probably be not more than twenty pounds, whereas if the real cargo was discovered it might mean a ten years’ stretch.”

I waited for him to land before I continued. “That must be the same dog that poor Brance saw.”

“Of course. He behaved exactly as we did from the time he spotted the Hawk, except that, instead of accepting the dog story in its entirety, he decided to have a look at the hangar—in other words, the cowshed. That’s where he was struck down.”

“But how can you be sure he landed there?”

“Because before I came on this show I went to the trouble of ascertaining what shoes he was wearing, in case there happened to be any footprints left in the field we proposed to investigate. He was wearing golf shoes with rubber soles, with a pronounced V-shaped pattern up the centre.

The imprint of them can be seen clearly in the soft earth outside the cowshed, although I didn't notice them by accident. I was looking for them."

"But you're not going to tell me that a girl like that would take any part in a cold-blooded murder," I protested, as the machine stopped in front of the club hangar and we all got out.

"What girl?"

"The girl who was flying the machine, of course."

Steeley took a cigarette from his case, lighted it, and flicked the match away before he answered. "That girl, my dear Tubby, was no dancing partner for a passionate bachelor, believe me."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"That girl was a man."

I stared at Steeley in blank astonishment. "What in the name of heaven put that idea in your head?" I cried unbelievingly.

He shrugged his shoulders in the expressive way he has. "Because," he explained, "when a girl is as smart and well-turned-out as the one we saw just now, I cannot reconcile perfectly manicured tinted finger-nails with nicotine stains. I'm far from being an expert in such matters, but I know enough of female psychology to assert that not one woman in a thousand who thinks anything of her appearance would appear in public with nicotine stains on the fingers of her left hand, particularly when attention is drawn deliberately to them by an application of carmine paint to the nails. A woman might get her fingers stained by a night's hard smoking, but she'd take care to clean it off when she got up in the morning, or at least, before she went out."

"Well, I'm damned," I muttered. "Wayne was certainly right about you; you do the detective stuff well."

"I ought to; I was dodging 'em long enough," was his dry rejoinder as he helped me to pull the machine just inside the empty hangar out of the fine drizzle that was beginning to fall, the mechanics presumably having gone to tea.

"But what's the idea of the masquerade, do you suppose?" I asked as we walked towards the club-house.

"That's something I can't tell you," he admitted. "Unless it's merely a dodge to get past impressionable officials. A woman can sometimes get away with things a man can't. Hello, what's this coming in?" He broke off abruptly, and stopped to look at a racy monoplane that was making a rather fast but very pretty landing.

“That’s one of the new Speedsters—American job,” offered Brian without hesitation. “It belongs to old Count Cortusoides.”

“Is he a member?” I asked casually.

“Yes, but he doesn’t often come here; just looks in once in a while—for petrol usually. They say he’s a Greek who made a million out of spice; got a private landing-ground at his home. He’s an old man, and doesn’t fly himself; I’ve seen his pilot once or twice, but I forget his name.”

We all watched the machine finish its run and turn towards the sheds before we went on into the club-house. There were only a few members about, which was not surprising considering the weather, so we had no difficulty in finding a secluded table, choosing one inside the long sun-parlour that overlooked the aerodrome.

While we were waiting for the steward to bring us some tea, looking out I saw an elderly, well-dressed man walking slowly along the path towards the club-house from the direction of the Speedster, which had been parked just in front of our hangar. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was limping, for he walked badly with the aid of a stick.

“I suppose this is the old boy you were talking about just now, Brian?” I asked casually.

He glanced up. “Yes,” he said, “that’s the Count. Wonder how he got his game leg? He’s a nice old lad from all accounts; tips the mechanics well, and all that.”

I was bursting to continue the conversation about our recent adventure, but a waiter began clearing the next table, and I thought it better to say nothing in his hearing. While waiting for him to go, I turned my eyes to the clouds, which seemed to be getting lower. “We shall have to get a move on if we’re going to try to get back to Brooklands to-night,” I observed.

Steeley, who had been watching the Greek millionaire with interest, made a quick inspection of the sky. “If it gets any worse, we’d better spend the night here,” he announced. “I suppose there’s a dormy-house, Brian?”

Brian nodded. “Oh yes, I’ve often stayed here.”

As the waiter departed the old man came in, and, much to my annoyance, chose a table near us; so close, in fact, that his presence would necessarily put a curb on intimate conversation. He was a fine-looking old fellow, with aristocratic features that were made all the more pleasing by a benevolent expression. His face was long and rather thin, but not unhealthily so; on the contrary, good health sparkled in his clear blue eyes. His hair was grey, but well-groomed, and without any suggestion of baldness on the top that usually goes with grey hair. A neatly trimmed beard, also grey, of the

sort usually known as an imperial, gave added strength to what was undoubtedly an interesting face. As was only to be expected, his hands were beautifully kept, and the long white fingers that held the menu card might have been those of an artist or musician.

He did not stay very long, remaining only long enough to sip a cup of China tea, but before he went Steeley did what I thought was an extraordinary thing. He took out a cigarette, and after tapping his pockets as if feeling for a match, he got up and went across to the Greek private owner.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "Would you oblige me with a match?"

The other gave him a quick, gracious smile. "I can't give you a match," he answered in faultless English; "but if its a light for your cigarette you want——" He felt in his waistcoat pocket, took out a small gold automatic lighter, and held up the flame.

Steeley lit his cigarette, and with a word of thanks turned to come back to our table. Rather clumsily, it seemed, the toe of his shoe caught the old man's stick and it fell on the parquet floor with a bang. With a quick apology, and an imprecation concerning his carelessness, Steeley stooped, picked it up and stood it in its former position. Then, looking slightly embarrassed, he returned to his own table.

A few minutes later I heard the engine of the Speedster start up. Count Cortusoides evidently heard it, too, for he called for his bill, and with a tip that brought a respectful "Thank you, sir," from the waiter, went out of the room, and presently I saw him limping along the path towards his machine. On the way he passed a man in flying kit who was coming towards the club-house. He was a stranger to me, but Brian told us it was Jerry Larkin, one of the Club's two instructors. The two exchanged a word in passing, and then the instructor hurried on towards the club-house.

Steeley stood up, yawning, but there was an odd expression on his face which I could not quite fathom. "I just want to slip along and have a wash," he said. "Don't hurry; I'll be back."

I poured myself another cup of tea, and was drinking it when Larkin strode into the room and came straight over to us. "I say, Brian," he called, without any preamble, "I wonder if you'd help me out of a jam?"

"Why, certainly," answered Brian instantly. "What's the trouble, Jerry?"

"I've only two machines left for school work, and one of 'em's just bust a valve spring," was the reply. "I haven't a spare one left in stock, but I could get one at Hamble if you'd let me borrow your Puss. I'd be back inside half an hour."

Brian looked a bit uncomfortable. “I’d let you have it like a shot if it was mine,” he said, “but it isn’t. It belongs to my friend Tubby Wilde. Here he is. Tubby—meet Jerry Larkin.”

“Of course you can have it,” I said, as we shook hands. “Get back as quickly as you can, though, because if the weather clears, we may decide to make a dash for Brooklands.”

“Thanks, that’s very nice of you,” declared Jerry, making for the door. “I shan’t be more than half an hour at the outside.”

Steeley came back just as Jerry went out. His face was a trifle pale, and he gave me such an extraordinary look that I remarked on it.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

He sat down in his chair opposite to us, and leaned forward over the table. “I’m just a little bit dizzy,” he said, very quickly. “Things are travelling so fast that my ordinary intelligence is finding it hard to keep pace with them.”

“Why—what are you talking about?” I asked, mystified.

“It rather looks as if we’ve established a record,” he explained half apologetically. “But the thing is at such variance with normal procedure that I can hardly believe it. Common sense tells me that there must be a snag somewhere.”

“How?” I muttered. “I mean—what’s a record?”

“For three amateur sleuths to solve a mystery and discover a murderer within twenty-four hours. Surely that takes a bit of beating?”

I stared at him. “Have you gone gaga?” I asked.

“I may have,” he admitted; “but I don’t think so. Listen! The fellow who stood in that field we examined this afternoon, and watched Brance crash, was flying an aircraft, or flying *in* an aircraft, with an exceptionally wide wheel-track.”

“That’s true.”

“Did you notice the wheel-track of that machine?” He pointed to the Speedster, which was just taking off.

“You’re not suggesting——” I began, but he held up his hand.

“The machine also had a tail-wheel instead of the usual skid. The Speedster is fitted with a wheel—look, you can see it.” The American machine was in the air now, and the wheel could be plainly seen under the empennage.

I laughed. “Go on,” I told him humorously.

“When the murderer got out of his machine—assuming that people do not smoke in aeroplanes—he lighted a cigarette.”

“Yes?”

“With an automatic lighter.”

“How the deuce do you know that?”

“Because we found the cigarette stub, but there was no match. Had the man been smoking a pipe or a cigar, the match might have been burnt right down to the end, because they take some time to get going, but a cigarette lights instantly, and a match used for lighting one is seldom more than charred at the top. That being so, the match-stick should have been there—unless the fellow put it in his pocket, which is so unlikely that it need not be considered.”

I caught my breath. “Is that why you asked Cortusoides for a light just now?”

“Of course. I knew before I asked him that he would produce a lighter.”

“Oh, come,” I protested. “That’s as good as saying you knew he was the murderer.”

“I would have been prepared to bet on it.”

“On the mere evidence of a wheel-track and a tail-wheel?”

“Oh dear, no. You remember the little group of holes in the ground?”

“Perfectly well.”

“They could only have been made with one instrument. The man who stood there watching the crash carried a walking-stick. Now, Tubby, answer me this. You’ve done a lot of flying in your time; how many men have you seen flying with a walking-stick?”

“None,” I admitted.

“Of course you haven’t,” he argued, almost fiercely, “for the simple reason that a man doesn’t take a stick with him into an aeroplane unless he’s a very good reason for doing it. The only reason for doing such a thing would be disablement, and most flying men are one hundred per cent fit.”

“Good God!” I breathed.

“Well might you say good God. When I came in here this afternoon I was prepared to start searching for a lame man who walked with the aid of a stick, and flew in an aircraft fitted with a tail-wheel and an exceptionally wide undercart. You will have no difficulty in believing that I was more than a little shaken when, far from having to hunt for such a man, within ten minutes one had walked in here and sat down almost beside us.”

“Isn’t that stretching coincidence rather far?” I suggested doubtfully.

“Coincidence be damned,” he muttered savagely. “It was no coincidence. He came here to look us over.”

“But dash it all, man, how was he to know that we existed, much less that we were sitting here?” I protested.

Steeley dropped his voice still lower. “Because the gent with the painted finger-nails told him what had transpired when he landed. He watched us take off, saw us head for Sparling, and gambled on finding us here.”

“Then the gent with the painted nails must have been very snappy,” I asserted sarcastically. “The Speedster was here right on our tail. Can you account for that?”

“Certainly,” replied Steeley imperturbably. “That cowshed arrangement happens to be within two miles of Gartholme Towers, which, as I have just ascertained from the Club’s roll of members, is the private residence of Count Cortusoides. And there are such things as telephones. Now laugh that off.”

I hesitated, feeling a little breathless. “Why did you knock his stick over?” I asked. “To measure the diameter of the ferrule?”

Steeley shook his head. “No,” he said, “nothing so difficult. I just wanted to feel the weight of it.”

“You’re not going to suggest that he killed Brance with it?”

“I think it’s more than likely.”

“But you couldn’t knock a man over with a slim stick like that.”

“Couldn’t you. There’s about two pounds weight of lead in the handle. I suspected it was loaded by the way it rolled when he first leaned it against the table.”

I looked at Steeley admiringly; I couldn’t help it. “Yes,” I said. “Wayne was certainly right. Your middle name should have been Sherlock. But I still don’t see what reason Cortusoides had for coming here to look us over.”

“If our suspicions, incredible though they may seem at first sight, are correct, there are thundering good reasons why he should want to see us. Besides—my God! I wonder—I wonder——” A new light came into his eyes as he turned his head slowly and looked along the tarmac towards the hangar. The Puss was standing outside with her engine just being revved up, and as he saw it he sprang to his feet as if he had been stung. “Who’s in our machine?” he rapped out.

“Only Jerry Larkin,” I told him quickly, startled by his manner. “I’ve lent it to him to go to Hamble. Why, what’s the——”

But Steeley wasn't listening. He was half-way to the door before I could get to my feet, and although Brian and I tried to catch him, he was on the tarmac before us, racing like a madman after the Puss, now taxying far out on the aerodrome. But if his intention was to stop the machine, he failed; he waved his arms as it swung round into the wind, but apparently Jerry didn't see him, for with a roar the Puss sped tail-up towards the aerodrome boundary.

"What on earth's the matter?" I asked as I ran up. "Have you gone crazy?"

I don't think he heard me. He just stood and stared at the machine now climbing steeply over the distant hedge. "Maybe it's all right," he muttered, more to himself than to us.

He had no sooner uttered the words than the Puss banked steeply as Larkin turned to get on his course for Hamble. Instantly there was a loud, splintering noise; I heard it distinctly above the engine. Then, to my unspeakable horror, the port wing seemed to tear off at the centre section.

The rest was a matter of a split second. The machine turned on its side as it was bound to, then the nose dropped, and it went down into the ground like a bullet. I flinched at the ghastly noise which, once heard, is never forgotten.

There was a cry of horror from the direction of the club-house, but we remained silent. Both Steeley and Brian were as white as death, and I suppose my face was the same. Brian started off at a run in the direction of the crash, but Steeley called him back. "It's no use, laddie, you can't do anything," he said quietly. "Besides, it's better to keep away from that sort of thing."

We saw the ambulance tear out, and then we turned away.

Steeley began to walk slowly towards the hangar, where an ashen-faced mechanic was staring out across the soaking turf. When he reached the place where the Speedster had stood he stopped, eyes on the ground.

"Steeley! Wait a minute," I cried. "You behaved as if you knew this was going to happen."

"I suspected something of the sort," he answered wearily; "but I was too long working it out. I wouldn't have flown again in that machine—at least, not without going over it. How could I possibly foresee that you would lend it to someone else?" he concluded bitterly.

"You think—it was tampered with?"

"Undoubtedly."

“Then Larkin was murdered?” I knew that no man could have survived such a dreadful crash.

“He was,” replied Steeley grimly; “but not intentionally. It was intended that we should be the victims. Look.” He pointed to the ground, and following his finger I saw a little group of round holes on the ground precisely the same as those we had seen earlier in the afternoon. “You don’t suppose it’s a fluke, do you, that these should occur on the scenes of two death crashes?” he continued. “They are not made deliberately, of course. We know for certain that these were made by Cortusoides, with his stick, as he got in and out of his machine, but I don’t suppose for a moment that he is aware that he makes them.” He took out his pencil, dropped it into one of the holes and then looked up at me. “Are you going to ask me to believe that those we saw in the field where Brance was killed—exactly the same size and the same depth—were made by somebody else? Surely that would be carrying coincidence to the point of absurdity?”

I did not answer; there seemed to be nothing to say.

“Come,” said Steeley. “Let’s hear what this fellow has to say.” He walked up to the mechanic who was still staring at the distant crash. “I believe Count Cortusoides has just gone, hasn’t he?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” answered the mechanic at once.

“Did he have his pilot with him?”

“Of course, sir—he doesn’t fly himself.”

“Pity. I wanted a word with his pilot. I didn’t see him in the club-house.”

“No, sir,” returned the mechanic, without hesitation. “He stayed here—at least, he was sheltering in the hangar when I got back from tea.”

Steeley nodded. “I see,” he said casually. “By the way, what’s his name?”

“Bromfelt—Captain Bromfelt, sir.”

“Thanks.” Steeley turned and began walking back towards the club-house.

“Well, there’s no question now about going back to Brooklands to-night,” I observed.

“So much the better,” was the curt reply. “I’d rather stay here.”

“Tell me, why do you suppose the Count wanted to—er—bump us off?” I asked as we walked along.

“I fancy he must have regarded our landing this afternoon as something more than a mere accident,” replied Steeley. “He’s evidently a gentleman who doesn’t believe in taking chances. He’ll probably be quite upset when

he learns how his scheme for our removal miscarried. He doesn't know our names, but I'll bet he makes a point of finding out before he goes to bed to-night."

In the club-house we learned that Larkin was dead. There was no need to ask; the gloom on everyone's face was sufficient to tell us.

We sat down at a table in the lounge, and Day, the steward, brought us drinks. "Count Cortusoides was on the phone a minute ago asking who you were," he said, as he put the glasses on the table. "He thought he'd seen you before somewhere."

"And did you tell him?" asked Steeley quickly.

"Yes, sir."

"How did you know our names?"

"I saw them in the visitors' book, sir," explained the steward. "I hope you don't mind——"

"Not in the least—not in the least," replied Steeley lightly.

"Are you going to tell Wayne about this?" inquired Brian, who had been very quiet since the crash.

Steeley looked pained. "My dear Brian, what earthly good would that do?" he answered reproachfully. "You should know as well as anyone that before you can hang a murderer in this country you have to produce proof of his guilt. Can you see any evidence lying about, circumstantial or otherwise, that we could offer a jury with any hope of a conviction?"

"No," he admitted. "What can we do about it, then?"

"Nothing for the moment," murmured Steeley; "but if we look carefully and cautiously, we might in time muster sufficient facts to send your benevolent millionaire member and his precious pilot to the warm regions where they undoubtedly belong."

CHAPTER IV

HAVING nothing else to do, we had dinner early, and we were just going back into the lounge when who should walk in but Wayne.

"What the dickens are you doing here?" was Steeley's not too friendly greeting.

“If I had no harder questions than that to answer, life would be one long sweet song,” replied the detective as he followed us into a corner and sat down. “I was in Southampton on a little matter when I saw a newspaper placard about a crash. Being rather interested in aeroplanes these days I bought a paper, and I don’t mind telling you that it gave me a jolt when I read about the machine being the property of Captain Eric Wilde——”

“How the devil did the paper learn that?” I interrupted.

“Easily enough,” put in Brian. “They’d only have to get the identification letters and then ring up the Aero Club, or else refer to the register of private owners.”

“So that’s how you do it?”

“Never mind about that,” continued Wayne. “Naturally, I wondered how this fellow—what was his name?—Larkin—happened to be flying your machine when I thought you were using it down here on this Brance job.”

Steeley took a quick glance round. “Not so loud,” he muttered.

“Like that, eh?” murmured Wayne, with more than a trace of good-humoured sarcasm in his manner. “Well, what happened? Did Larkin walk off with it, or something?”

“No, I lent it to him,” I answered. “He wanted to fetch a spare part from Hamble.”

“So that’s all it was? I was hoping that you were getting on the track of something.” Wayne was clearly disappointed.

“No, it’s all quiet on the western front,” went on Steeley, with a warning glance in our direction. “By the way, one of the members here struck me as being a very interesting fellow. Perhaps you can tell us something about him. His name’s Cortusoides; Count Cortusoides, I believe.”

Wayne looked surprised. “Do you mean to say he’s a member of a little tin-pot show like this?” he asked, rather crudely, I thought, since he was at that moment a guest of the same ‘tin-pot show.’

Steeley nodded.

“Cortusoides is reckoned to be one of the wealthiest men in the country,” declared Wayne. “They say he’s worth a couple of million, and I should think he must be by the way he spends it. He gives a thousand pounds to the Police Force Benevolent Fund every year, so you can guess we look after him pretty well. Made his dough out of spice, in the days when it was big business. He’s a Greek by birth; still has an estate in Greece, I believe, to say nothing of a villa at Monte Carlo, a chalet in Switzerland, a deer-forest in

Scotland, and God knows what else. He's got a town house in Hertford Street, and a country place not far from here called Gartholme Towers."

"Is he married?" asked Steeley.

"No, but he's got a daughter. Smart girl by the name of Helene; I've had her pointed out to me in the West End once or twice—outside the Seventy-Seven Club in Piccadilly, I believe it was. Matter of fact, I believe she flies, too; now I come to think of it, she used to fly to and fro between their place, here, and Monte Carlo; the newspapers had a little story about it when she first started."

"What's this Seventy-Seven Club? I've never heard of it," put in Steeley.

Wayne chuckled. "Shouldn't wonder at that," he grinned. "It's for top-notchers only. I've never been inside, but from all accounts it makes the palaces of ordinary kings look like the back bedrooms of a Bloomsbury boarding-house. The old man was one of the founders, and I expect it was his cash that supplied the necessary. Apart from a steam yacht, a fleet of cars, a racing stable, and a few aeroplanes, I think that's about all he owns," concluded Wayne facetiously.

"These little hobbies must cost him a pretty penny one way and another," suggested Steeley.

Wayne glanced up and caught his eye. "What's the idea?" he asked shrewdly. "Not thinking of putting him down as number one on your list of suspects, are you?" he grinned, obviously pleased with his joke.

"I might," returned Steeley calmly. "After all, I've got to begin somewhere, haven't I?"

Wayne laughed aloud. "Then I'd better ring him up and remind him that his annual sub for the Benevolent Fund is due, before you apply for a warrant for his arrest," he declared. "But I shall have to be getting along," he ended, getting up. "Let me know how you get on." With a parting wave he moved towards the door.

"Cheerio," called Steeley. "Remember us to Raymond. You can tell him things are going well."

For a minute or two while we finished our coffee nothing more was said, but I could see that Steeley was turning something over in his mind. "The night is yet young, and I've a feeling that we might be doing something," he said with a faint smile. "Let's go and see what the weather is like."

We strolled out into the hall just as Wayne came out of the telephone box.

"Hello, I thought you'd gone," exclaimed Steeley, raising his eyebrows.

“I’m just off now,” replied Wayne. “I thought I’d pop in and give the Count a ring about that sub of his while it was still in my mind. He’s sending it along to-morrow.” Then his face broke into a broad smile. “He was tickled to death when I told him that one of my specials was contemplating honouring him with the title of Public Enemy No. 1.”

Such a look came over Steeley’s face that for a moment I thought he was going to strike him, but he controlled himself with an effort and went to pass on. “Did you by any chance tell him my name?” he asked icily.

Apparently Wayne saw that he had made a mistake, for his smile faded quickly, to be replaced by a puzzled frown. “Matter of fact, I did,” he admitted. “He asked me. Why, what’s wrong with that? No harm in a little joke, was there?”

“None whatever,” replied Steeley coolly. “Certainly not when the joke is on you. At this moment your generous friend, the Count, is crediting you with being a much bigger fool than you really are.”

Wayne glared. “Why?”

“Because,” returned Steeley, calmly, “he happens to be the man who murdered Stephen Brance last Thursday. He also murdered Jerry Larkin this afternoon, regardless of the fact that the Coroner will bring in a verdict of accidental death.”

For a moment Wayne’s jaw dropped; then he pulled himself together in his heavy, bulldog fashion, “Bah! You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?”

“No, of course I don’t,” answered Steeley quietly. “All the same, I’m just telling you, so that if I, Tubby, or Brian disappear unaccountably in the near future you’ll know who was responsible. It may also give you an idea of where to begin inquiries—not that they’d be likely to get you far.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” asked Wayne belligerently.

“Do you mean now?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing. The damage is done. But if you want to make amends, go back to your office at the Yard, disconnect the telephone, lock yourself in, and throw the key out of the window. Then you shouldn’t be able to do any more harm for a bit.” With that Steeley turned on his heel and walked away.

We followed him out on to the tarmac, where there was an awkward silence for a minute or two. “Can you imagine any man in a responsible position being such a blundering oaf?” he said bitterly.

“Well, you certainly left him in no doubt as to what you thought of him!” I remarked.

“I intended to,” growled Steeley. “Wayne has the brain of a hen. Guts and bulldog tenacity when he gets his teeth into a thing have got him where he is, but as far as finding a thing—but don’t let’s talk about him. All the same, we’d better provide ourselves with automatics at the first opportunity. Cortusoides knows where he is now; he knows where we are, and so do we. Meanwhile, it’s a nice fine night; how about ringing up for a car and doing a bit of quiet scouting? There are two places I should like to see. One is Gartholme Towers, and the other is the cowshed where we landed this afternoon. As I told you, they’re quite close together.”

“Let’s go, by all means,” I agreed.

Steeley turned to Brian. “Run along and ask your Secretary the name of a garage; ring them up and ask them to send a car right away—a good one, to drive ourselves, with plenty of petrol.”

Brian went off on his mission. We followed slowly, and in the hall stopped to look at a large-scale map of the district that occupied one of the walls.

“Here’s the Towers,” said Steeley, putting his finger on the spot. “The cowshed must be about here. What does it say? ‘Gartholme Priory—ruins.’ That must be the old building we saw behind the shed. I didn’t pay much attention to it when we were there, and I’d forgotten all about it. I wonder if it has any connection with the Towers?”

Brian joined us. “A car will be here in ten minutes,” he said.

We waited in the entrance-hall, where, turning over the late edition of the evening papers which had just been delivered, I saw something that made me smile.

“Poor old Wayne certainly is having a tough day; he’ll begin to think life isn’t worth living by the time he gets back to his office, or if he happens to buy a paper on the way,” I remarked, calling Steeley’s attention to a paragraph which announced that ‘Monkey,’ otherwise Peter Edmund Sharpe, *alias* this and *alias* that, had, that afternoon, escaped from Wormwood Scrubs Prison, where he was awaiting trial on a charge of shooting and wounding a policeman who had endeavoured to ‘pick him up’ as a person suspected of being in possession of firearms. Sharpe, it appeared, was well known to the police as an associate of drug distributors and white-slave traffickers, and to judge by the photograph that accompanied the paragraph, there was no doubt that the policeman was quite right in trying to ‘pick him up,’ for a more villainous face I never saw in my

life. One glance at the low forehead, little dark eyes set close together, and the abnormally long upper lip from which he had obviously derived his unflattering nick-name, was all that was necessary to reveal a character as unpleasant as it was dangerous.

The paragraph concluded with a line to the effect that, although the prisoner had undoubtedly been helped from outside the gaol, the flying squad was on his trail, and hoped to effect his re-arrest in the very near future.

"No, it doesn't look as if Wayne will get much sleep to-night," murmured Steeley, as he tossed the paper back on to the table.

In a quarter of an hour we were on our way, and the clock on the church at Dimcote, the nearest village to our objective, struck nine as we cruised past it.

"I've a good mind to leave the car here," declared Steeley. "It can't be more than a mile and a half to the Towers, and if we go on our feet we shall be less tied than if we take the car. What's more, we're less likely to be seen or heard."

"I think you're right," I agreed. "The car is all right on the road, but we shan't know what to do with it if we have to do any cross-country work."

That settled it. We left the car outside the village petrol station and set off at a brisk pace down the secondary road that led to the Towers. On both sides of us stretched open moorland, typical of the outskirts of the New Forest, gorse, heather, and bracken for the most part, with occasional silver birches and mountain ash. It was all very quiet. Occasionally a rabbit scuttled across the sandy road or an owl hooted in the distance. There were no other sounds. We met no one, nor did anyone overtake us, so it seemed that if a desire for loneliness had played any part in the Count's choice of a residence, he had succeeded admirably.

Steeley must have been right in the matter of distance, for twenty minutes' sharp walk brought us to a brick wall, some ten or twelve feet high, which marked clearly the boundary of the estate we were looking for. Above it, on the inside, tree-tops of many shapes and sizes loomed darkly against the sky.

"I expect we shall come to the gates in a minute," observed Steeley, as we walked quietly along the grass border of the road; and we did, a massive wrought-iron affair hung on side pillars surmounted with the usual round stones; in fact, just the sort of gates one would expect to find. On the left-hand side of them we could just make out the vague outline of a lodge, but not a light was showing anywhere.

Steeley walked up to the gates and tried them, and I don't think any of us was surprised when he found them locked. Raising my eyes, I saw that there was a notice of some sort fixed near the top of the ironwork, and taking a step nearer could just make out the words, which were painted in white letters on a black background.

" 'Beware of Alsatians,' " I read aloud.

"Alsatians, eh? That's awkward," muttered Steeley. "In fact, it rather looks as if it puts the tin hat on things, unless we knock up the lodge, which I don't feel inclined to do. We're in no case to take on a bunch of Alsatians—assuming that the thing isn't just a scare to keep beggars away. There's no sense in getting ourselves bitten."

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked.

"I don't see that we can do anything about it," he answered, walking up close to the gates and peering through the bars. Instantly there was a low growl inside and I saw two or three dark shapes gliding towards us.

I stepped back hastily. "It's no bluff, at any rate," I observed.

Steeley followed me back. "You're right there," he said shortly. "That's that, then. Let's see if we have better luck at the cowshed."

With that we set off again. The wall continued for the best part of half a mile, and then it turned sharply to the right, away from the road, along the inside of an extensive coppice of pines. After that we had open country on the left and the wood on the right.

"Wait a minute," said Steeley. "If I've got my bearings right, and I think I have, the cowshed lies somewhere the other side of these trees." He pointed to the wood. I didn't move. There were only a few stars and no moon, so it was dark where we were, but inside the wood it was as black as pitch. "We shall break our legs or our necks if we try to find a way through that," I protested.

"I don't think so," returned Steeley. "Let's try it, anyway. I've plenty of matches." He started off and, naturally, we followed him, although I was not feeling in the least happy.

How Steeley kept his direction I don't know, but he must have done, for about a quarter of an hour later, almost before I was prepared for it, we came upon the ruins of what I knew must be the Gartholme Priory we had seen marked on the map. They stood in a little clearing, and a more dismal spectacle I have never seen. As far as I could make out the Priory was a ruin in every sense of the word, although it must have been a fine building in its day, covering the best part of a quarter of an acre of ground; but now the noble Gothic windows were hollow and overhung with gnarled ivy which

looked nearly as old as the stonework. In this condition, such a building is depressing at the best of times, but in the silence of the night it was doleful in the extreme.

Another few paces forward revealed a moat of inky water, as motionless as if it had been a sheet of black glass, and it was not until we had circumnavigated it that we realised the castle was to all intents and purposes an island, for its only connection with the mainland was a narrow bridge of crumbling stone. The moat was very irregular, and perhaps hardly a moat in the true sense of the word; a more faithful impression might be gathered if I described the ruin as an artificial islet in the middle of a pond—it was hardly large enough to be called a lake.

"Queer place," said Steeley quietly, as we stood gazing at it.

"Very queer," I agreed. "And I don't mind telling you that a comfortable chair in the Club with a mug of beer at my elbow makes a far greater appeal to me than that haunted-looking sepulchre."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Brian softly.

"Well, there's not much use staring at it," murmured Steeley. "Let's see if we can find the cowbyre; it's somewhere in this direction."

We skirted the mere and entered the trees, which began again on the far side, and I must confess that my heart began to beat faster as we crept like shadows through the pines, for I more than half expected a challenge to ring out at any moment. Nothing of the sort happened. Then Steeley stopped and laid a hand on my arm. "There it is," he whispered.

Peering through the gloom, I could just make out the shape of a long, low building silhouetted against the sky. All was in darkness and as silent as a tomb.

But as we stood there watching, listening, with nerves taut, a faint sound came to my ears; a regular sound; a sort of *crunch-crunch-crunch*. It reminded me of something, and at first I could not make out what it was, but then, suddenly, I knew.

"That sounds to me like cows chewing the cud," I breathed.

Steeley began to walk forward, and like a trio of burglars we advanced until we were standing right against the shed, which was built of brick with a tiled roof. There were two doors of the sort that open in halves, and against one of these Steeley laid an ear. Then, with what seemed to be an appalling noise, he lifted the iron latch and swung the top half open. Instantly the air was flooded with the warm smell of cows.

I heard Steeley's matches rattle; one scraped against the box and nearly blinded me by its sudden light. Shading my eyes I peered inside the shed.

“What would you expect to find inside a cowshed?” murmured Steeley, in an amused tone of voice.

“Cows,” I answered promptly.

“Well, there they are.”

For a full minute, during which time we struck two or three matches, I stared at the cows. Some were lying down; some were standing; they all seemed to be eating or chewing the cud.

“Well, I’m damned,” I said at last.

Steeley laughed quietly. “A bit shattering, isn’t it? What you might call an anti-climax.”

I was just turning away when a strange voice spoke so close to us that I fairly jumped, and broke out into a perspiration.

“Lorst you way, maaster?”

The man, apparently a farm labourer, stood just behind us, an old hurricane lantern, with a feeble yellow flame showing through its murky glass, hanging from his left hand. What he thought of the way we sprang round I don’t know, but it must have struck him as odd, to say the least of it.

Steeley recovered his wits first. “Yes,” he said. “Somehow we’ve managed to get off the road; can you direct us back to it?”

“Which way be you goin’?”

“To Dimcote.”

“Then you’d best go by the footpath, ’stead of goin’ through the wood,” the fellow told us.

He led us right through the cowshed and out on the other side, so that we were actually standing not ten yards from where my Puss Moth had landed in pursuit of the Hawk.

“That’s the way; keep straight on, and ye ca’ant miss the village,” said the man, pointing to a distinct track that led off along a belt of trees which seemed to be the opposite side of the pinewood through which we had come. That was all. We thanked the cowman, said good night to him, and leaving him with his cattle, set off along the path.

Now that the nervous strain had passed I don’t think I ever felt quite so foolish; after what we had expected to find it would have been hard to imagine a more ridiculous anti-climax.

“Well, what do you make of it?” I asked as we trudged along, as soon as we were out of earshot of the labourer.

“I can’t make anything of it,” confessed Steeley. “The thing needs thinking about.”

We came to one of those new-fashioned wire fences, but a curved iron stile transmounted it, and we went on. More stars were out now, and by their dim light it was possible to see that some fairly big timber lay just ahead of us, but before we came to it we passed several large groups of rhododendrons, and then struck what appeared to be a winding grass ride, the turf being short and well-kept. Our path merged into it, and we kept on, but I had a feeling, by the way Steeley looked about him, that he was a trifle worried.

"This looks more like a gentleman's estate than a public footpath," I ventured an opinion.

"It does," agreed Steeley, "and that's not all, unless my bump of locality has gone to hell. But for the fact that we know its impossible on account of the wall, I would have sworn that we were cutting straight across the Count's estate."

As he spoke we rounded the corner of a shrubbery and then stopped dead, for there, right at our feet, was a wide stretch of lawn, like a bowling green, surrounded by shrubs and flowerbeds. A little to our right I could just discern the outline of what appeared to be a summer-house, and a sudden feeling of disquiet assailed me. But before I could say anything a cigar glowed, revealing a white shirt front, in the dark shadow of the building, and an instant later a voice spoke.

"What's the matter, gentlemen; are you doubtful about the path?" it said.

Once having heard it, there was no mistaking it. The speaker was Count Cortusoides.

CHAPTER V

I HAVE heard of 'moments big as years.' That was one. My first reaction, after the immediate shock had passed, was one of unreality and disbelief. The second was fear; not because of any visible danger, but rather by the very absence of it.

I left it to Steeley to answer the Count's question, and, of course, he did, with that complete sangfroid that either came naturally to him or else was a quality, a faculty, which he had developed deliberately to a very high degree —I was never sure which it was.

“I’m extremely sorry if we’re trespassing, sir, but having lost our way some distance down the road, I took the advice of a rustic who assured us that this was the footpath to Dimcote.”

“He was quite right,” the Count told us. “An old right-of-way runs transversely across my grounds; it’s rather a nuisance at times, but I have no power to close it.”

I noticed that he said nothing about the wall or the Alsatians. How we had got into the grounds was a mystery to me, but I began to suspect that our passage through the cowshed had something to do with it, as was in fact the case, although I did not have proof of that until later.

“Come,” said the Count. “I’ll show you the way to the high-road.”

With that we joined him as he started limping slowly, with the aid of his sinister walking-stick, across the turf, our feet making no noise on the soft grass. It was an extraordinary sensation, and for my part my brain was whirling in a wild endeavour to adjust itself to a totally unexpected set of conditions.

“It’s very nice of you to go out of your way like this after being disturbed in your own garden,” murmured Steeley easily, as we walked up a broad path which presently emerged from a shrubbery on to a wide, open, gravelled area, behind which loomed the vast bulk of a house with corner turrets which presumably gave Gartholme Towers its name. A powerful electric light shone over the front door.

“Please don’t mention it,” replied the Count, with an airy wave of his cigar; and then, as we came within the radius of the light, he glanced at us, quite naturally. He stopped at once. “Why, surely you’re the gentlemen I saw taking tea at the Aero Club this afternoon,” he said in a surprised voice.

Steeley laughed shortly. “What an extraordinary thing,” he answered; “and you are the gentleman who gave me a light for my cigarette, in return for which I knocked your walking-stick over.”

The Count nodded courteously. “Quite correct,” he smiled. “Not expecting visitors, I’m afraid I have no cards with me, so may I introduce myself? My name is Cortusoides—Count Cortusoides.”

There was no getting out of it. He knew our names, of course, or, at least, Steeley’s, for Day, the steward, had told him when he had rung up the Club. Clearly, he did not suspect that we were aware of that fact, and while Steeley imperturbably went through with the introductions, I felt that in view of what Wayne had told the Count we were on the verge of an awkward situation. We were.

“Delaroy—Delaroy——” echoed the Count. “Surely I’ve heard that name somewhere quite recently. Why, of course! Inspector Wayne of Scotland Yard mentioned it to me this very evening. You must be the friends he spoke about.”

I held my breath, feeling that I was sitting on a barrel of gunpowder on which someone might drop a spark at any moment. The very last thing I expected was a reference by the Count to the conversation he had had with Wayne. We had all stopped, by mutual consent it seemed, immediately under the light, and I couldn’t help casting my eyes around, half expecting to see a machine-gun poking out of the bushes. But there was nothing, or if there was, I couldn’t see it. How would Steeley wriggle through the meshes of the net which I felt was fast closing round us? I could only stare in dumb amazement when, far from trying to evade the trap, he seemed deliberately to entangle himself still further.

“Wayne!” he cried. “Fancy you knowing Wayne. I can’t think why he should mention my name to you, I’m sure, but it must have been me to whom he was referring. I know him very well, and he knows me, too. He once had good reason to know me, and my friend Tubby Wilde.” He broke off with a chuckle, and for the first time I glimpsed the line he was taking.

The Count glanced up quickly, “You worked with him, perhaps?” he suggested.

Steeley laughed aloud, and there was real mirth in it. “*With* him? No, sir, not exactly. I should be ashamed to confess it, but the boot was very much on the other foot. Ask him about it some time; maybe he’ll tell you about it —maybe he won’t.”

“How extremely interesting,” said the Count, very slowly, and I could see that the tables had been turned on him. It was his turn to put on the thinking cap. “Well, we’re all members of the fraternity of the air, so now about coming in for a cocktail before you go?” he suggested.

I caught my breath at this ‘won’t-you-come-into-my-parlour,-said-the-spider-to-the-fly’ invitation, and tried to catch Steeley’s eye; but it was no use; he was looking at our host.

“We’d be honoured and delighted,” he said cheerfully.

The closing of the door behind us gave me the same sensation as the click of Traitor’s Gate at the Tower of London must have given political prisoners in mediæval times. We were inside. Should we ever go out again?

The Count led us into a lounge that adjoined a spacious hall, where he invited us to be seated while he fetched a number of bottles from the sideboard and stood them on the table within easy reach.

“What would you like?” he said. “I have an excellent sherry, one that I can recommend, an Amontillado that I went to some trouble to acquire.”

Steeley and Brian both voted for sherry, while I, feeling that I might as well be poisoned for a sheep as a lamb, followed their example.

“Tell me more about this association of yours with Wayne,” invited the Count, as he handed us our sherry. “I confess you have intrigued me.”

“It’s rather a delicate subject,” protested Steeley gently. “I don’t want to give you the impression that you are entertaining a party of professional crooks, or anything like that.”

“Good gracious! You arouse my curiosity still farther,” cried the Count. “I’ve always wanted to meet somebody who has had the temerity to break the law, possibly because I’m far too nervous to even contemplate anything like that myself; but that doesn’t prevent me from having a grudging admiration for those who do—within reason, of course. I bar robbery with violence, and things like that.”

“You wouldn’t include smuggling, in a quiet way, amongst the crimes you hold as—er—in bad taste, I’m sure of that,” declared Steeley quietly.

Personally, I thought that was a bit pointed, but the Count didn’t seem to mind.

“And why are you *sure* of that?” he asked, very softly, as he sipped his sherry.

“Because unless I am mistaken, it was your daughter who—quite by accident, I assure you—we found committing that very offence only this afternoon. Being up-to-date, she used an aeroplane for the purpose.”

“Really! You astonish me. I know she flies a lot—indeed, she has her own machine—but I didn’t know she practised——”

“Oh, I’ve no reason to suppose that she makes a practice of it.”

“I’d better speak to her about it; I’ve no wish to see her name in the papers, or mine, if it comes to that. What form did the—er—contraband take?”

Steeley smiled faintly. “It was quite harmless. She merely brought her dog over. People have introduced worst things than that.”

“You seem to know,” observed the Count suggestively, a shadow of a smile hovering about the corners of his mouth.

“I should,” was Steeley’s surprising answer. “At one time, before I was found out, I ran quite a profitable little business in questionable cargo.”

The Count didn’t turn a hair, but I could see that the calm announcement had given him something to think about.

“And Wayne was the man who found you out, eh?” he smiled shrewdly.

Steeley shook his head. “No,” he said. “We were never caught. Did you ever hear of a cracksman named Dale—Dude Dale?”

“Vaguely.”

“I did a business deal with him once, to my eternal regret,” explained Steeley. “Later on, uninvited, he committed the unpardonable indiscretion of leading the police to my establishment, unwittingly, it is true; and as if that wasn’t bad enough, he must needs plug a policeman right outside my front door. Wayne was outside in the police cordon, and he shot Dude stone dead. Luckily for me I was able to convince him, possibly because I was an old war-time comrade of his, that it wasn’t my affair, but all the same, it created an unpleasant aroma around my residence, and I had to retire from business. That’s all. And now, having disclosed my murky past, I think we’d better go.”

“Don’t hurry on my account,” put in our host quickly. “Tell me, under what name were you operating? I seem to remember something of the affair.”

“I don’t think you’d remember my name in connection with it,” answered Steeley quietly. “Wayne may tell you more about the whole thing if you care to ask him.”

“And that’s how you came to be associated with him, is it?”

“Associated? I don’t think that’s quite the right word,” replied Steeley casually, shaking the ash off his cigarette into the fireplace. “He realises that I must know quite a lot about what goes on behind the curtain, so sometimes he asks me to tip him a wink. As a matter of fact, I have, once or twice, but more often I pull his leg. Poor old Wayne; I think he suspects it, but he doesn’t know when I’m serious and when I’m not.”

There was a brief silence. “You’ve abandoned your wicked ways now, of course?” murmured the Count.

“Of course,” echoed Steeley. “As a matter of fact, it got rather boring after the novelty had worn off; besides, there isn’t the money in it that there used to be, due possibly to the fact that there is more competition.”

Again I held my breath, but nothing in the Count’s manner showed that the remark meant anything to him.

“You think other people are doing it now?” he asked suavely.

“Unquestionably.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Oh, little things I’ve observed from time to time; they’d pass unnoticed by most people, but I’ve been in the game and know the signs.”

“Does Wayne know?”

“I think he suspects.”

“Has he asked your opinion?”

“Of course, knowing what he does about me. In fact, I’m not sure that he doesn’t suspect me; he seems to bob up at unexpected moments. Only this afternoon he turned up at Sparling, although how he learned I was there, or that I was flying, is more than I can say. He blew in just after you’d gone, and passed one or two pointed remarks. I got a bit sore with him, and told him that he might as well pick on you.”

“Why did you tell him that?”

“I suppose because you were still fresh in my mind, and as I’ve been in the States for the last twelve months—as he could confirm if he went to the trouble to find out—the thing is equally absurd.”

“I see. What were you doing in the States?”

Steeley hesitated. “Well, you’ve heard one-half of the story, so you might as well hear the other, although I’m not proud of it. I happened to be chief pilot to Slick Ferrara, the gangster.”

The Count regarded Steeley quizzically. “You seem to have had what might be called a chequered career,” he observed in a queer voice. “What’s Ferrara doing now?”

“Gazing up at the sky through six feet of earth.”

“How very unpleasant. Presumably somebody—what do they call it?—bumped him off.”

“You bet they did.”

“Had you anything to do with the bumping?”

“A little, although Tubby here actually fired the winning shot.”

The Count stared at me—as well he might.

“Well, there it is,” smiled Steeley. “Ask Wayne who bumped off Slick Ferarra. He’ll tell you. There’s no need for you to get alarmed, though. We don’t even pack guns these days,” he concluded, springing up as he glanced at his watch. “Good Lord! We must be getting along. We’ve enjoyed your hospitality, sir. I hope you’ll ask us in again some time.”

“Don’t mention it. I have found your conversation most refreshing and entertaining, not to say unusual. Are you often at the Club?”

“I think the others have been there quite a lot lately, but, as I told you, I’ve been away. We shall probably be down quite a bit now, though.”

“Are you going back to the Club to-night?”

“Yes.”

“You’re rather far afield, aren’t you?” was the Count’s next disquieting question, but it didn’t upset Steeley.

“Yes, we are, rather,” he confessed. “It turned out a fine night, so having nothing better to do, we decided to go on a pub crawl. It was so pleasant in Dimcote that we left the car there and took a walk to stretch our legs.”

We all moved towards the door.

“Would you like my car to take you back to the village?” offered the Count.

“No, thanks, although it’s nice of you to suggest it,” answered Steeley as we walked across the hall. “The exercise will do us good. We ride too much, I’m afraid.”

The Count let us out of the front door. “Sure you won’t have the car?”

“No, thank you, sir. Good night.”

“Straight down the drive and you’ll come to the gate,” directed the Count. “Good night.”

“Good night,” we all echoed, and started off across the wide sweep of gravel at the termination of the drive.

I could hardly believe that we had been permitted to go, but before I could voice the relief that was in my mind, an extraordinary thing happened. A window in one of the corner towers was thrown open, and a low cry moaned through the night. It was not exactly a moan—it is hard to know what to call it; but it was certainly a cry of despair, heart-stirring in its appeal.

Instinctively we all stopped, eyes turned upwards, but beyond a vague female form I could see nothing. Then something white fluttered to the ground. The form disappeared and the window was closed.

Brian ran forward and picked up whatever it was that had been thrown out.

“Put it in your pocket; come on, let’s get out of this,” muttered Steeley in an undertone, and we resumed our walk towards the gate.

“What about the Alsatians?” I breathed.

“They don’t seem to be about,” answered Brian, glancing round anxiously.

Nor were they, for we reached the gates unmolested. To my surprise they were now unlocked. We passed through them, and I was breathing a heartfelt sigh of relief when out of the bushes inside the gate ran a terrier, barking fiercely.

It was the white dog.

For a moment we looked at it without speaking; then, with one accord, we turned away.

CHAPTER VI

"For an evening which once promised to be singularly void of incident I don't think we did so badly," I observed in a low voice as we walked smartly up the road with the wall of the Towers estate still on our left.

Steeley glanced furtively towards it. "I think we should be wise to postpone debate until we are on the open heath," he murmured.

In a few minutes we had left the corner of the wall well behind us, and rounding the first bend in the road, we saw the bleak moorland on either side of us.

"Let's sit down and have a cigarette, if nobody minds wet grass," suggested Steeley. "I'm anxious to see this thing Brian picked up."

We sat down on the bank beside a gorse bush, and Brian took the white object from his pocket. As I suspected it was a piece of paper, screwed into the form of a note. He handed it to Steeley, who opened it and smoothed it out on his knee. In the yellow glare of a match we saw that a few words had been written in pencil on one side.

"Please help. I am prisoner. Safe me."

That was all. There was no heading, no signature.

"Well, that's pretty bald," muttered Steeley. "A foreign lady is a prisoner in the Towers. That's all it tells and ever can tell us."

"Why foreign?" I asked.

"The omission of the article 'a' before the word prisoner, and the misspelling of the word obviously intended to mean 'save' can only mean that, whoever wrote the note, is not proficient in writing English. A child

might make the mistake, but the woman we saw at the window was certainly grown-up, so I can only conclude that she is not of this country."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing—at least, not at present. It would take more courage than I've got to go back and try to force my way into the Towers."

"Couldn't Wayne do something?"

"My dear fellow, do credit Cortusoides with a little imagination. If the police made an official search—and that's the only sort of search they could make—believe me, the last thing they would be likely to find is the lady who pencilled this brief but tragic S.O.S. She will, I fear, have to wait until—well, until——"

"And what was the idea of to-night's farce?" I asked. "You were both fencing, of course?"

"Call it that if you like," admitted Steeley. "But I should be telling a lie if I denied that I wasn't shaken when I saw the Count standing there on the lawn. In fact, to be quite honest, I braced myself for the bang of a bullet. But then I saw through his scheme."

"It wasn't just a fluke, running into him?"

"I don't think so, although there is just a chance that it was; I don't suppose we shall ever know for certain. My own impression, which may be quite wrong, is this. The Count knew that we suspected something—never mind what—and came to the Club to-day to look us over. Remember, whoever reported the cowshed incident to him saw only two people in the Puss—you, Tubby, and myself. Brian kept out of sight. Very well. He arrives at Sparling Aerodrome in time to see us walking towards the Club-house with Brian. I expect he had seen Brian there before. Is that so, Brian?"

"Oh yes."

"With Brance?"

"That I can't say for certain. The Count meant nothing to me at that time, but I can recall two occasions when he landed there while Brance was on the aerodrome at the same time as myself."

"Exactly. Very well. He sees you there with us, knowing that you knew Brance who was working for the police. He smells a rat at once and tries to kill us. He fails. Wayne then rings him up and hands him the astonishing piece of information that we suspect him of being Public Enemy No. 1. Joke or not, that must have given him something to think about. The rest is straightforward. If his suspicions are without foundation, nothing will happen; if we are indeed on his track, what will be our first move? Where

next are we most likely to pursue our inquiries? Obviously, either the Towers or the cowshed. Had we tried to get into the Towers to-night, I fancy we should have found him waiting for us, but not in the way we might have supposed. I'll explain what I mean about that in a minute. He is a clever man, is Count Cortusoides. He may have seen us peering through the gates of his drive for all we know—but that's pure guesswork, and it doesn't matter, anyway.

"Very well. We go to the cowshed. Everything has been nicely prepared for us, cows chewing the cud, *etcetera*, *etcetera*, and the cowman there to direct us to headquarters. Why? So that we can be bumped off? Certainly not. He is by no means sure of how much we really told Wayne, and he didn't want the police snooping round looking for us. I'll tell you what I think. I believe that if we had tried any rough stuff we should have got all we asked for, but the Count preferred to try the velvet glove first. And it was a very sound move. He meets us, plays host in a most charming manner, and more or less throws the place open to us. Don't you see how cunning that was? If he had tried the mailed fist and succeeded in bumping us off, he would have the problem of Wayne to face. He doesn't want a hue and cry if he can prevent it. If he had cut up rough, and we had managed to get away, it would have been open warfare. But if, when we come round spying, he says, 'Come in, boys, and have a drink,' what are we going to do next? He spikes our guns in one go. It's foolish to be found spying round a man's house when he's already made you welcome in it.

"As things turned out, he started a conversation which I fancy went a good deal farther than he anticipated. I saw a chance of putting across the biggest bluff of my life, and I jumped at it, with the result that he is the one who is now scratching his head. I told him we were crooks. That was something he most certainly was not prepared for, and the strength of the statement lay in the fact that it was true, as he'll lose no time in confirming, unless I'm mistaken in my judgment of him. I even told him to ring up Wayne for the facts, and if that doesn't settle any doubt that may still linger in his mind about us, I don't know what will. The long and short of it was, we put a new idea into his head. Instead of being enemies, we might prove to be friends, valuable employees in his graft. I played that string pretty hard, as you may have noticed, but I didn't go too far. It wouldn't have done for me to suggest that he might be able to use us, for that would have defeated its own object, in that it would have been tantamount to telling him that we knew he was a crook. The next move will come from him, you watch it. If you could see him at this moment, you'd find him sitting down trying to work out the best plan of getting in touch with us again with a view

to pushing proceedings a little farther, the ultimate object being our enlistment in his organisation. Taking it all in all, his own plans made it possible for us to turn the tables on him in a way that we could never have done ourselves, even if we had thought of the idea, which is unlikely. So I shall await his next move with interest. But we'd better be moving; it must be getting late."

We set off again, walking on the short grass that flanked the roadside, and, rounding the last bend before reaching the village, came suddenly upon a stationary saloon car. Only the sidelights were on, but in the rays of the offside one we could see that two men were busy changing a wheel, working with unusual speed and vigour, or so it seemed to me.

So intent were they on their task that I don't think they heard us until we were right up to them, but when they did, they both jumped back with such a start that instinctively I side-stepped half expecting something to happen. For a moment the light was reflected on their faces; and then we were past, walking on as if they had not been there.

"Don't look round," breathed Steeley sibilantly.

As far as I was concerned, there was no need to look round. I had recognised one of the wheel-changers. Indeed, having seen the photograph in the evening paper, I should have been blind if I hadn't. It was 'Monkey' Sharpe, and what a nasty-looking piece of work he was; so much so that I held my breath for a good minute after we had passed, expecting a knife or a bullet in my back.

As we turned into the village Steeley grabbed me by the arm. "Did you see who that was?" he snapped.

"You bet your life I did; it was 'Monkey' Sharpe."

"You saw who was with him?"

"No—not that I looked particularly hard."

"It was Grangerton—you remember, he was outed from the Service for something nasty, and was foolish enough to kick up a row about it. Southern Airways took him on afterwards, but had to report him to the Air Ministry for something that was never made public. But he lost his ticket. Cortusoides must have picked him up. My God, Tubby, this begins to look an even grimmer business than I thought it was."

"Hadn't we better let Wayne know his man's down here? He'll be turning the East End upside-down for him."

"Wait, let me think," muttered Steeley as he hurried across to our car. We got in, but he did not attempt to drive away. Instead he sat with one knee

cocked up and his chin in his hand. “I think I can guess why ‘Monkey’s’ down here,” he said presently.

“Cortusoides is going to hide him.”

“Possibly, but I think it’s far more likely that he’s going to fly him abroad. What an opportunity we should have if only we had a machine.”

“In what way?”

“Assuming that ‘Monkey’ is going to be flown out of the country, and the pilot is going to wait for daylight before he starts, we could follow the machine and locate one of his criminal dumps. What did Wayne say about him? A chalet in Switzerland, a villa in Monte Carlo, and a shooting-box in Scotland? It will be one of the three. I begin to see a method in this. We’ve got to know which way the machine goes—north, south, or east.”

“If he doesn’t take off until dawn, we’ve got time to get to an aerodrome, charter a machine, and get back,” I suggested.

“I think you’re right,” agreed Steeley quickly, and reached for the self-starter.

Simultaneously a distant sound reached us, and he threw up his hands despairingly, for there was no mistaking the noise of an aero engine ticking over. Then he slammed the car into gear, swung it round, and went racing back down the road up which we had just walked.

“Steady on, don’t get too close,” I protested.

“I must hear which way the machine goes,” was Steeley’s curt reply, but he jammed on the brakes some distance before reaching the wall, and throwing open the door jumped out on to the road. We followed, and stood staring up at the sky whence came the roar of an aeroplane circling for height, but of course we could see nothing. Then the sound began to recede, and Steeley pointed. “South,” he said laconically. “Oh, why haven’t we got a machine!”

“What about borrowing one of the Count’s?” suggested Brian calmly.

Steeley started. “Do you know where the hangar is?”

“Of course! I’ve seen it from the air a dozen times.”

“Could you find it in the dark?”

“I think so.”

“What machines has he got?”

“I don’t know for certain, but there’s the Speedster, the Hawk, and one or two others, I believe.”

“Even if we could get a machine, it would be a gamble,” muttered Steeley, half to himself. “There could be no question of finding the one that

has just taken off while it's still dark. The only chance would be to assume that it's making for Cannes, which is the nearest public aerodrome to Monte Carlo, and try to get there first with the object of following the occupants of the other machine when it lands. If they're in the Speedster the thing's a washout, but if they took the Hawk, and we could get the Speedster, it might be possible to beat them to it. But there, it's no use; we couldn't get all the way without re-fuelling, and not having any papers on us we should be stopped and held up at the first place we landed at, unless—unless somebody went solo in the machine while the others went back to the Yard and asked Wayne or Raymond to ring up the French authorities and ask them to let our machine through. Neither Wayne nor Raymond will be in their office at this hour, but never mind that; let's see if we can find the hangar for a start. If we can get a machine, we ought to be able to fix the rest."

Leaving the car by the side of the road we followed Brian as he set off at a trot diagonally across the heath. What a business it was, falling into rabbit-holes, tripping over brambles and I don't know what else; but ten minutes brought us to a wide, flat area from which all obstruction had been cleared.

"The hangar is over there, on the side nearest to the house," muttered Brian, pointing into the darkness.

We set off again, now moving more cautiously, but all was quiet and no lights showed anywhere. To me the whole thing seemed the maddest adventure upon which we had ever embarked, but I was not going to say so.

The hangar turned out to be a modern, well-built affair of timber and corrugated iron. There was still no sign of anyone, but a car, with the engine still hot, was standing near the entrance. I had a nasty feeling in the pit of the stomach as Steeley pushed against one of the sliding doors, but it opened easily, and the curious mixed smell of oil, dope, petrol, and varnish that is inseparable from aeroplanes greeted our nostrils.

"Brian, keep guard outside. Tubby, strike a match," ordered Steeley.

The first thing I saw in the yellow glare was the Speedster, which was standing just inside the entrance. Two other machines were there also, one of them a monoplane with French registration letters, but the Hawk had gone. Steeley was up on the Speedster in a flash; for a moment or two he fumbled, then he joined me again.

"Tanks are full," he whispered. "Come on, let's get her out."

We had to ask Brian to help us, but in a few minutes the machine was outside the hangar facing the open heath.

"How far away are we from the house?" Steeley asked Brian.

“About a couple of hundred yards.”

“My God! As close as that! Never mind, let’s go through with it now we’ve started. Listen, Brian; I’m going to ask you to fly her; you’ll be better off solo, and there’ll be plenty for me and Tubby to do here. We’ll try to get Wayne to fix the route for you, so that you won’t be held up. Give her two minutes to warm up and then get off. You can find your way?”

“Sure.”

“If the weather holds fine make straight for Dijon; refuel there, and push on to Cannes. If the weather turns bad, don’t try crossing the Alps, but go down the Rhône Valley, via Bron to Marignane, and then turn east along the coast. You ought to do it in five or six hours. If you get there first and see the Hawk land, try to send us a cable addressed to Tubby’s flat, then hire a car and follow whoever was in the machine. As soon as you’ve done that, get back here as fast as you can.”

“Where shall I land when I get back?”

Steeley thought for a moment. “That’s awkward,” he mused. “You’d better not try getting down in a proper aerodrome in case Cortusoides starts a hue and cry. I tell you what. Land her in the field where Brance was crashed. We’ll be there to pick you up. Got some money on you?”

“A pound or two.”

“Then you’d better take this.” Steeley handed Brian his wallet. “You’ll be able to change sterling into francs at either Dijon or Cannes. Feel all right?”

“Perfectly.”

“Then off you go. Don’t give her more than two minutes.”

Brian clambered up into the cockpit and Steeley ran round to the propeller. The engine started at the second swing, and after the silence the noise sounded like two locomotives colliding. I was still staring at the machine, stunned into a condition of partial paralysis by the din, when Steeley caught me by the arm.

“It’s time we were moving,” he said tersely, and set off at a run in the direction from which we had come.

If Brian only gave the Speedster two minutes then they were the longest two minutes I ever remember. Lights appeared in several places behind the hangar, and I heard someone shout. Dogs barked.

“Hell’s bells! We’ve certainly stirred up a hornets’ nest,” I gasped as we ran.

My words were lost in the roar of the Speedster's engine as Brian opened the throttle. There was no wind, so the direction of the take off didn't matter; all the same, I was thankful when I heard the machine in the air, turning over our heads as it swung round to the southward.

The business of getting back to the car was a nightmare, but in the end we reached it, and I sank limply into a seat while Steeley, after turning in the direction of Dimcote, set off at such a speed that I clung to the window handle and shouted a protest.

"You'll kill the pair of us," I gasped.

"Look behind," was all Steeley said.

I looked back, and saw two blinding orbs of light blazing along the road; already their beams were playing on the tree-tops ahead of us. No need to ask what they were. We were being pursued.

"They'll catch us easily in this damned pantechnicon," I muttered.

"Of course they will—if we keep straight," agreed Steeley.

"Then let us get out and take to the fields," I suggested.

"What! And let them discover where the car came from, and so trace it back to us? Not on your life. Sit still and hang on."

Then began a grim chase, the memory of which still haunts me in my worst dreams. Steeley, risking not only our own lives but the lives of everyone else on the road, switched off all lights. The moon, now rising above the trees ahead, gave us just sufficient light to see where we were going. A policeman standing by a bicycle waved his arm at us, but Steeley took no notice. We reached a fork, took the right-hand turn, and a minute later shot round the corner of a side-turning at a speed that brought a protesting scream from the tyres.

I looked behind. The searchlights were still quivering in the sky.

"They had to stop and listen to make sure which way we had gone," shouted Steeley, following my line of thought.

We dashed through another village and for a moment all was dark behind us; the next second I nearly put my head through the window as Steeley swung into what was clearly a private drive. A little farther on I could see the black silhouette of a church. He shut off the engine, and with a curt "Come on," jumped out and ran a short distance into the black shadow of a line of yews just as a big car roared past the entrance to the drive. It was going much too fast for us to make out any details of the occupants.

Steeley darted back to the car. Another minute and we had backed out and were racing back along the road we had come.

"I fancy we've given them the slip," I said thankfully.

"I think so."

"Where are you making for now?" I asked.

"Back to the Club."

"They may follow us there."

"All the more reason why we should be there when they arrive. We told the Count we were going back, don't forget, and if he suspects that we had any hand in the purloining of his aeroplane, that is the place where he will start making inquiries. If we're not there, he'll draw his own conclusions. If we are, he won't know what to think."

"But what about fixing up with Wayne to ask the people at Dijon to let Brian through?"

"Let's do one thing at a time," suggested Steeley.

CHAPTER VII

One thing at a time! Well, events may have occurred one at a time, but following on a nerve-trying afternoon and evening I was feeling pretty cheap long before we were through with them.

It was evident that we had succeeded in giving our pursuers the slip, for nothing untoward occurred on our way to the Club. We ran the car on to the concrete patch at the rear of the Club-house, where cars were usually left, and there Steeley displayed the foresight and attention to detail that put him so far ahead of people like myself. Removing the cap from the radiator he poured into it can after can of cold water, regardless of the overflow, until all the hot water had been ejected, so that at the finish the car might have been stationary for half an hour or more instead of the few minutes that was actually the case. This done, we went to our rooms, the door of the dormy-house having been left open for us. Brian's door we locked, and took the key with us. Then on Steeley's instructions I went to my room, got into my pyjamas, and put the light out.

I hadn't been sitting on my bed more than a few minutes when I heard him speaking to someone; he seemed to be talking out of the window, so I opened mine to see what was going on.

The first thing I saw was Steeley, in pyjamas, leaning out of his window, which was next to mine, in conversation with the three occupants of a car

which had obviously just pulled up close to ours; they had got out and were standing by the bonnet as though inspecting it. The dormy-house was, as is usually the case, a bungalow, so we were on the same level as they were, and not more than a few yards away.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I thought I heard someone messing about with the car, Tubby," answered Steeley. "So I got up to see."

"What's the idea?" I inquired, addressing the strangers.

There was a moment's silence. Then, "Is this your car?" one of them asked—unnecessarily it seemed.

"It is," I told him. "At least, it's a car I've hired, so I'm responsible for it."

"I see," was the reply. "Well, we're police officers, and we're looking for a stolen car."

"That isn't it," I asserted emphatically.

"You haven't seen anything of another car?"

"How the devil do you suppose I can see anything when I'm in bed with the light out."

"I thought perhaps you hadn't been in long."

"Long enough to get into bed, where I propose to return just as soon as you've finished handling my property."

That settled it. There was a brief, muttered conversation between the three men who then got back into their car and drove away.

Steeley at once came round to my room. "Good!" he said. "I think we've convinced them that we've been home long enough not to have had any hand in pinching the Count's aeroplane."

"You think they were the Count's men?"

"Without the slightest doubt. He rushed them along to see if we were here; that was all those fellows wanted to know. Get dressed. We've no time to lose if we are going to speak to Wayne before Brian is held up somewhere."

Before we left we disturbed Brian's bed to make it look as if it had been slept in, and then wrote a note to the Club Secretary, as from Brian, saying that we had made an early start for Town, with the object of buying another aeroplane to replace the crashed Puss, but that we all hoped to be back that evening. Then we set off for London.

It had turned four o'clock when we arrived at Scotland Yard, where we had a stroke of luck in catching Wayne just leaving for home after a night

spent in vain searching for the fugitive ‘Monkey.’

“What the hell do *you* want?” he asked irritably when he saw us.

I forgave him for being bad-tempered, for he looked worn out.

“Shan’t keep you long, Wayne,” replied Steeley. “I came here to get your home address, hardly daring to hope that I should find you here.”

“Home, eh?” sneered Wayne. “I might not have a home, for all I see of it.”

“Been looking for ‘Monkey’ Sharpe, I suppose?”

“Looking is the right word.”

“Pity you wasted so much time. You can call your men in, ‘Monkey’ is in France.”

Wayne blinked. “What the devil are you talking about?” he snapped. “He only got out last night.”

“I know. I’m just giving you the tip, in return for which I want you to do something for me—two things, perhaps.”

“Where’s ‘Monkey’ Sharpe; that’s all I want to know?”

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t tell you at present, but I may be able to later on,” he promised.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Ring up the Paris police and ask them to notify all airports that if an aircraft bearing British registration letters G-XXCL lands, on no account to detain the pilot, regardless of the fact that he carries no passport and has not cleared Customs.”

“Oh, my God,” groaned Wayne. “I expect that’s young Brian.”

“Quite right,” admitted Steeley.

“What the hell’s he doing there?”

“Never mind about that; I’ll tell you later on.”

“The French police won’t be pleased with a job like that at this hour of the morning.”

“Never mind whether they’re pleased or not, will they do it?”

“Of course, if I ask them to, and tell them that the pilot is one of my men.”

“Then the sooner you get on to them, the better.”

“Anything else?”

“Only this. If by any chance Count Cortusoides should speak to you, either on the telephone or in person, about us, tell him the truth, but forget

that we are working for you or that Brian has anything to do with a newspaper. Give him the impression that we're a bunch of smart crooks; tell him that I once did a job with Dude Dale, and that it was Tubby who bumped off Slick Ferrara."

Wayne didn't speak for some seconds. "What sort of game do you think you're playing?" he asked slowly. "Is the Count likely to ask me?"

"I think it's a certainty."

"You're crazy."

"The bare fact of him asking you these things, when he does, should suggest to you that there must be some method in our craziness."

"*When* he does."

"That's what I said. Will you do as I ask?"

Wayne waved his hands helplessly. "I suppose so," he agreed morosely. "One thing and another I'm getting into a state when I don't know whether I'm coming or going, and that's a fact."

"Well, just bear up a little while longer and we may be able to hand you the key of a nice little trap with all the birds you want inside it," said Steeley comfortingly. "We're going on to Tubby's flat now to get a few hours' sleep. Don't forget to ring up the French police; it's important."

"All right. When can I find you if I want you?"

"We shall be at Tubby's flat for the next two hours; after that we shall go back to Sparling."

With a curt nod Wayne departed, while we went back to the car and drove round to my flat in Jermyn Street. I opened the door with my latchkey, and inside ten minutes I was fast asleep.

I seemed to have done no more than shut my eyes when I was awakened by Steeley, who was waving a telegram triumphantly. I saw that it was broad daylight.

"What's the time?" I asked.

"Turned eight. Get a move on."

"Is that a cable from Brian?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"He handed it in at Cannes at seven-ten, and just says 'M and G just landing in Hawk. Following. Expect me later.' "

"That sounds like pretty good work," I declared.

"Brian's a good boy."

“He’ll be pretty tired by the time he gets back. Ten or twelve hours’ flying in a day is enough for anyone.”

“Yes, by the time he gets back I expect he’ll have had enough to stall him off ever attempting long-distance record-breaking,” agreed Steeley.

“And what’s the programme now?” I asked.

“A fairly straightforward one. First I shall have to go to the bank to get some money. After that we’ll go down to Brooklands and see about a new machine. One of us will have to fly it down to Sparling.”

“Why only one?”

“Because somebody will have to take the car back.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “I’d forgotten all about the car. All right, then; you take the machine and I’ll take the car. What shall I do with it—leave it at the garage?”

“No, I think we’d better keep it in case we need it again. Go to the Club, but call at the garage on the way and settle up with the fellow, or he’ll be telephoning the police that his car has been stolen.”

And so it was decided. At Brooklands we managed to pick up a good second-hand Leopard-Moth, which suited us rather better than the Puss, and after lunch I started back for Sparling in the car, leaving Steeley to follow at his leisure with the machine.

On the way down I had some trouble with a sticky valve which I got put right at Guildford, but owing to the delay it was not until after four that I got back to the garage, where I found the man just beginning to get worried about his car, so I settled any doubts in his mind by buying it outright as the most satisfactory arrangement, and then lost no time in getting up to the Club. Steeley had said that he would be at Sparling not later than four-thirty, as we estimated that Brian might be back any time after that hour; so I didn’t waste time calling in the Club-house, but after parking the car I walked along the tarmac to await Steeley’s arrival.

It seemed that we had both timed things pretty well, for as I walked along the footpath towards the hangars I saw the Leopard come sailing in. Steeley saw me wave to him and taxied up to where I stood.

“Are you going straight on to the field?” I asked.

“I think we’d better,” he decided. “He might be back any time now, and we don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Whereupon I climbed in, and Steeley at once took off again on the short hop to the ill-omened field where we had arranged to pick up Brian.

We could see from the air that he had not yet arrived, so we glided down, landed, and got out to stretch our legs until he came.

"So far the thing has worked like clockwork," declared Steeley as he lit a cigarette, "If Brian gets back all right I think we can congratulate ourselves on a snappy piece of work."

I agreed, but mentioned that I would rather some other field had been chosen, for, with the scene of the fatal crash so close, I couldn't help thinking about poor Brance.

"What made you choose this field?" I asked.

"It was the only one I could think of on the spur of the moment," answered Steeley. "Anyway, there's nothing like getting the enemy worried," he continued. "And I don't think they can help being worried when their missing machine is discovered here. As pure coincidence it would take a lot of swallowing. If the Count is at all inclined towards spiritualism, he might even wonder if Brance's ghost had anything to do with——"

"Oh, rot," I broke in. "You—hark! Here comes a machine."

"That's the Speedster's engine," declared Steeley, and he was right, for half a minute later the machine skimmed in sight over the trees. It circled for a moment and then glided in just as we had.

"Well, I call that pretty good work," smiled Steeley, as we began to walk towards the Speedster. "A little careful thought will take one——"

What he said after that I don't know, for I was no longer listening; I was too engrossed in watching the open door of the Speedster from which had emerged, feelingly, the end of a walking-stick. With my heart performing strange evolutions, I waited for the owner of it to follow, although I knew only too well who it would be.

Count Cortusoides stepped down heavily on to the grass and waved to us cheerfully when he saw us standing there. "Hello," he cried, "what's the matter? Have you had a forced landing?"

"Yes," answered Steeley in a sort of strangled voice.

I don't think I could have spoken had my life depended on it.

CHAPTER VIII

"Don't lose your head," breathed Steeley as we walked slowly to meet the Count. And then, aloud, "It's very nice to see you again so soon, sir. We were just going back to Sparling for tea when our engine decided to pack up. Nothing serious—something in the petrol lead. We managed to clear it and were just having a cigarette before going on."

"Excellent," cried the Count. "I'm going to Sparling, too. We should be able to practise formation on the way—that is, if my pilot will play," he added, smiling.

I glanced up at the cockpit of the Count's machine and saw a dark face regarding us dispassionately. I recognised it at once. It belonged to the man Grangerton, the pilot with a nasty reputation who had been with 'Monkey' the previous night when they had found it necessary to change a wheel on the Dimcote road, and I began to scent the solution of the mystery, for if we had read Brian's cable correctly it was the man who had flown 'Monkey' to Cannes. It rather looked as if he had seen the Speedster there, recognised it, and flown it home. In that case, what had happened to Brian? It was a question upon which I preferred not to dwell.

All this time Steeley and the Count were chatting as if they were the best friends in the world, and presently, when the Count moved towards his machine, Steeley led the way back to ours. For a moment he caught my eye, and from the twinkle in his I knew that he was enjoying himself thoroughly. I wasn't. The society of a man I knew to be a calculating murderer filled me with apprehension.

"What do you suppose has happened to Brian?" I asked Steeley as he taxied into a corner of the field to take off.

"God knows," was the only answer he made, as he fixed his eyes on the distant trees and eased the throttle open.

In the air I noticed that, although he kept close to the Speedster, he took good care to keep behind it, and I was at no loss to find the reason.

As a matter of detail the short journey back to Sparling was perfectly straightforward, but I breathed a sigh of relief when our wheels touched and we ran to a stop close to the Club hangar.

We waited for the Count and Grangerton to join us, and then walked down to the Club-house for a belated tea. I was the first to go in, and if I stopped dead for a moment just inside I had a very good excuse. Standing against the mantelpiece with a cup of tea in his left hand and a slice of cake in the other, was Brian.

A peculiar expression crossed his face when he saw who was entering the room, and for a second the hand that was conveying the cake to his

mouth seemed to stall; but then it went on again, and he greeted us as if he had been waiting for us.

"Hello," he cried cheerfully. "Here you are, then."

Being in front of the Count I could not see how his expression reacted to this meeting, but perhaps it was as well that he could not see mine, for I was flabbergasted. Whether the Count expected to see Brian there, whether he was surprised, or whether he took it all as a matter of course, I had no means of knowing.

"Hello, Brian, I see you've started your tea," observed Steeley casually. "We're just going to have some. Come over and join us."

As before, we selected the large table near the window, and there Brian joined us, bringing his cup of tea with him and still eating cake. He looked rather tired, but he was clean and brushed as if he had just had a wash; with a small blue flower in his buttonhole he might have been just going out.

For a moment all seemed well, but it was only a lull before the storm. The Count's next words exploded like a bomb.

"Well, Brian," he said brightly, "how's the Mediterranean looking?"

I felt sorry for Brian. The words must have struck him like a blow on the head, and, although he made a brilliant recovery, for an instant his face reflected the shock the question must have given him. It was bound to.

"Mediterranean," he echoed. "What on earth makes you think I've been to the Mediterranean?"

"The flower in your buttonhole," answered the Count, winking at me as if he was enjoying a joke. "You cannot deny that it came from the Riviera. That particular gentian only occurs there."

"But if it grows there, surely there is no reason why it couldn't have been transplanted somewhere else?" parried Brian.

"In the ordinary way, perhaps not," agreed the Count; "but, you see, it happens to be a hybrid. Purely as a matter of interest, it was raised only a short while ago, in a certain royal garden in eastern Europe. The King was so taken with it that he—rather selfishly—forbade its general distribution. But I am a keen gardener myself, and I happen to know the gardener who raised it, so it is not remarkable that a small piece of it came into my possession. In fact, I was under the impression that the only specimen that existed outside the royal gardens was in the garden of my villa at Juan les Pins."

"Then that's where he must have got it," declared Brian readily.

A puzzled look crossed the Count's face. "*Who* got it?"

“The fellow who dropped it. He got off the four o’clock machine from Paris to Croydon. It came in while I was there collecting a pair of gloves I’d left in one of Fred Laker’s machines. He runs Universal Airways, Limited. I saw the fellow drop the flower, and thinking it was rather nice, I picked it up and stuck it in my buttonhole.”

“Did you find your gloves?” asked the Count evenly.

“No, but Fred said he’d find them before the day was out, so he may have them by now,” replied Brian, beckoning the steward. “Day,” he went on, as the steward came up. “I wish you’d do a little job for me. Ring up Universal Airways at Croydon; try to get through to Mr. Fred Laker and ask him if he’s found my gloves.”

“Very good, sir.”

There was rather a funny atmosphere as the steward left the room. Obviously, no one except Brian knew how much truth there was in his story. Personally, I didn’t believe a word of it. Nor, I fancy, did the Count. So it was all the more surprising when, after a brief interval in which we discussed the respective merits of British and American machines, Day came back and announced that Fred Laker had found the gloves, and offered to post them on if Brian would say where he would like them sent.

“Ask him to post them here, then I shall get them in the morning,” Brian told the steward confidently, and then turned back to the table with a faint suspicion of ‘Well, now I hope you’re all satisfied’ in his manner. “You’ll have to watch that plant of yours, sir,” he told the Count warningly. “Somebody seems to have had a nibble at it already.”

“Yes, I shall,” agreed the Count seriously.

After that we chatted inconsequentially for a little while, and then the Count rose to go. I noticed that he avoided any reference to the stolen aeroplane, but suddenly he looked round as if he had been struck with an idea. “Are you doing anything this evening?” he said, pleasantly.

We all looked at each other.

“No,” said Steeley, “we’ve nothing on.”

“Then how about coming and dining with me?”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” answered Steeley. “There’s nothing I should like better, and I think I can speak for the others.”

“Splendid!” exclaimed the Count. “How will you get over? You won’t want to fly back in the dark. Ah! I’d forgotten. You’ve got a car here, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, “we’d better come in the car.”

“Then I tell you what,” went on the Count. “If you’ll give me a lift we needn’t break up the party.”

I had a feeling that Steeley was not too pleased with this arrangement; he would have liked to have had a word with Brian first, although it is not unlikely that it was in order to prevent this that the Count had suggested coming with us. We could hardly refuse to take him, so the matter was left at that, and we were all walking towards the door when the spanner was thrown into the gears with a vengeance. The door was thrown open from the other side and who should stalk in but Wayne.

“What-ho!” he cried jovially as he saw us. Then he pointed an accusing finger at Brian. “Look here, my lad,” he said reprovingly, “the next time you want to go tearing about France in an aeroplane at short notice, just read the regulations before you start.”

It was as much as I could do to stifle a groan, but Steeley burst into a roar of laughter. Why he should laugh, or how he could laugh at such a moment is more than I can say. But he did, and it only took matters from bad to worse.

“Yes, you can laugh,” went on Wayne, frowning, “I’ve been chasing you all day. I went round to your flat, but you’d gone. Where’s ‘Monkey’ Sharpe?”

It was a facer, but Steeley didn’t turn a hair. “Is that what you’ve been chasing me to find out?” he inquired.

“Of course. Where is he?”

“What do you think I am—a magician?” asked Steeley. Luckily he was behind the Count, so he was able to give Wayne a warning grimace without being seen by him. “Believe me, my dear fellow,” he went on, “I know no more about ‘Monkey’ Sharpe than the Count does.”

It was a subtle stroke, but so far as I could see, without purpose.

“And who may ‘Monkey’ Sharpe be?” asked the Count suavely.

“Oh, just a bad egg who declined Wayne’s invitation to stay with him indefinitely,” smiled Steeley. Then to the detective, “All right, Wayne,” he said seriously. “If I hear anything I’ll let you know.”

Wayne took the hint. “All right,” he grumbled, “I was hoping you’d have some news, though. Where are you going now?”

“The Count has been kind enough to ask us to dine with him,” said Steeley evenly.

“I’m surprised at you, sir, after what I told you to-day,” observed Wayne, with affected reproach.

It was the Count's turn to look uncomfortable, although he carried it off pretty well.

"And just what did you tell the Count about us to-day, if I may be allowed to know?" asked Steeley bluntly.

I fancy Wayne felt that he was getting out of his depth, but he smothered his embarrassment with a show of good-humoured chaff.

"I told him a few home truths about you three fellows," he declared. "I also mentioned that you were the only people who had succeeded in walking through a double cordon of police officers, with me amongst them, without anyone discovering how the trick was done."

"Then when I tell him, as I may if he wants to know, he should find the story quite entertaining," said Steeley politely.

"After all that I think it's time we closed a conversation which shows signs of becoming personal," smiled the Count, moving towards the door.

CHAPTER IX

During the drive to Gartholme Towers, personalities were, however, avoided, apparently by mutual consent. The Count sat in front next to Steeley, and as we cruised along the peaceful country road a conviction was born in my mind that the thin ice on which everyone seemed to be skating would presently break, plunging the skaters into deep—not to say cold—water from which some of them might find it difficult to get out. What lingering hope I may have had that the pleasant but noncommittal conversation would persist after we got to the Towers, was soon dispelled, and it was the Count who, during dinner, took the initiative—deliberately, there was no doubt of that.

"Well, young man," he said, addressing Brian, as we began our soup. "There is one thing I should be most interested to know."

"What's that, sir?" asked Brian, little expecting what was coming.

"Just why you decided to fly off with one of my aeroplanes last night," murmured the Count, in the same tones that he might have employed in asking for the salt.

There was an awkward silence, during which I could see from Brian's face that he felt it was useless to go on lying. I think he deliberately left it to Steeley to help him out, and, of course, he did.

“I don’t think it’s quite fair to ask leading questions like that,” he said lightly, breaking his roll, “but since you have asked, and Brian seems slightly embarrassed, I will answer for him. But not at the moment. From earliest childhood I have always disapproved of anything in the nature of a catechism at meal-times, so with your permission we will leave this, and the other awkward questions you no doubt have in your mind to ask us, until we adjourn for coffee.”

The Count bowed slightly. “Forgive me,” he said. “You are quite right. It would be foolish to upset our digestions unnecessarily.”

So nothing more was said about the matters that most concerned us until the end of the meal—which, incidentally, was an excellent one—when we went into the lounge in which the Count had entertained us on the occasion of our previous visit. Until that time we discussed general subjects, from crime to aviation, and I must say that the Count revealed himself to be a first-class *raconteur*. But once settled in the lounge he turned his eyes on Steeley inquiringly, and it was clear that his earlier question was not to be avoided.

“You promised to tell me why our young friend borrowed one of my aeroplanes, last night,” he reminded him, with just a suspicion of emphasis on the word borrowed.

Steeley sugared his coffee, lighted a cigarette which he took from a box on the table, and then settled himself in an easy-chair.

“Well, it was like this,” he said confidentially. “I had an assignation in the South of France; not personally, but I had arranged to collect something—you understand?”

The Count nodded.

“The success of the whole undertaking depended upon the employment of an aircraft,” continued Steeley, “and when our Puss Moth was crashed by poor Larkin we were left in a difficult position. In talking over ways and means, Brian reminded us that you had a fleet of private aeroplanes, and a landing-ground, so after discussion we decided that the use of one of your machines was indicated as the easiest way out of our difficulty. Now you know what we were *really* doing when we ran into you on the lawn last night.”

“I see,” said the Count slowly, and I could tell that he was weighing up this new aspect very carefully. “But tell me,” he went on, “was there any reason why you couldn’t buy another aeroplane?”

“There was,” asserted Steeley. “A very good one. We hadn’t enough money.”

The Count raised his eyebrows. “But you’ve just bought a new machine,” he challenged.

“Ah! That was only made possible by the—er—success of our venture last night,” parried Steeley.

“I suppose it would be impertinent to enquire the nature of the venture?” smiled the Count.

“It would,” agreed Steeley. “As far as we’re concerned it doesn’t really matter, but someone else is involved, so it would be unfair——”

“Of course, of course,” broke in the Count apologetically.

“I need hardly say that Brian was going to bring your machine back after we had finished with it, you realise that?” said Steeley earnestly.

“Quite—oh, quite.”

“Then by your generosity we’ll drop the subject now. I offer sincere apologies on behalf of the whole party.”

“Very well, but purely as a matter of interest, how did Brian get back?” inquired the Count.

“I flew back on the regular air line,” said Brian easily, answering the question himself.

“And so arrived at Croydon?”

“Exactly. From there Fred Laker, of Universal Airways, who happens to be an old friend of mine, flew me down to Sparling on the plea of an urgent appointment, which was true enough. He went straight back, taking my gloves which I accidentally left in the machine with him.”

“Excellent! And so the whole story dovetails perfectly,” smiled the Count.

“Not too badly, I hope,” grinned Brian.

“There seems to be only one unexplained gap, which I should like to see filled up before we close the subject,” interposed Steeley.

The Count looked round at him. “And what is that?”

“We’ve been frank; I think it’s your turn now. How did you recover the machine?”

I felt a bit shaken by this point-blank question, but the Count didn’t seem to mind.

“All perfectly simple,” he said. “Captain Bromfelt, my pilot——”

“Bromfelt, did you say?” interrupted Steeley.

“Yes—why?”

“Only that he had a different name when last I heard of him,” said Steeley quietly. “Pray continue,”

“Bromfelt—as I know him—went to the Riviera yesterday to fetch some things from my villa there,” went on the Count. “You can imagine his surprise on reaching Cannes when he saw one of my machines on the aerodrome there, one that had been in the hangar when he left. Naturally, he rang me up immediately. I told him to fly it back to the Towers, which he did. Afterwards, on the way to Sparling, he saw you force land, and the rest you know.”

My own feeling about this plausible story was that it was true in substance up to the point where the machine returned to the Towers, but I suspected that the rest, the landing in the same field as ourselves, was not altogether the accident the Count made it out to be. However, I had no time to ponder the matter then, for our conversation was interrupted in a manner which from the very beginning I could see was going to end badly.

The door opened, and who should walk in but Bromfelt. (As he was known to the Count as Bromfelt I had better stick to the name.) One glance at his flushed face was sufficient to tell me that he had been drinking, and his first words made it clear that he was one of those objectionable people who become aggressive in their cups.

“What’s going on?” he asked belligerently, eyeing us all suspiciously.

I happened to glance at the Count’s face, and what I saw caused something inside me to stir uneasily. For a brief moment the mask of polite interest faded; his eyes half closed, the muscles of his face stiffened, and his lips set in a straight line.

“I cannot recall asking you to join us, Bromfelt,” he said coldly.

“No, you didn’t. You took damn good care not to,” rasped Bromfelt.

“Then perhaps you would be good enough to withdraw until I do,” said the Count quietly, but there was a quality of hardness in his voice that should have warned the man he addressed.

“Well, that may be your idea, but it isn’t mine,” retorted Bromfelt rudely. “I know your game. I know what you’re fixing up with these three scabs. And if you think I’m going to stand for that sort of gaff, you’ve got another think coming. You can frighten the guts out of the others, but not me.” He broke off and turned to Steeley. “I’ve got a piece to say before you clinch a deal with this——”

“Bromfelt! Will you kindly leave the room?” The Count’s voice was like ice cracking in a frozen pool.

Bromfelt set his teeth. “Like hell I’ll leave the room,” he snarled. “Listen, you——”

There was a sharp hiss like that made by a soda-water siphon, but ending on a louder and more abrupt note. Where it came from I could not make out, but its effect on Bromfelt was horrible. He broke off short. A spasm of agony convulsed his face and he clutched wildly at his chest. “You—you——” he gasped. Then he crumpled up like a coat falling from a peg and crashed to the floor.

The Count sprang to his feet. “Dear, dear, dear,” he said in an agitated voice. “Silly fellow—silly fellow. He knows his heart is bad, yet he goes and works himself up like this. I’m afraid he’s had a stroke.” He hurried forward, not to the fallen man, but to the bell on the wall.

Two footmen appeared instantly.

“Captain Bromfelt has been taken ill,” the Count told them quickly. “Get him to bed, send for the doctor, and see about getting him to hospital if it is necessary.”

Neither of the men spoke. One nodded. Then between them they picked up the unconscious pilot and carried him from the room.

The Count turned to us, apology on his face. “I’m very sorry that this should have happened while you’re here,” he said in tones of anxiety. “I’ve warned him so many times. But there, the doctor will attend to him; don’t let it spoil our evening.”

Now all this had taken place in no more, and probably less, time than it takes to read, and I was finding it hard to keep pace with things. I had managed to catch Steeley’s eye, but his face was expressionless; Brian’s had an odd look on it, but it told me little of the trend of his thoughts. Of one thing I was certain, however, although I did my best not to let the Count see that I suspected. In spite of his bland assurances about Bromfelt, I was not deceived. Whatever had happened to him was not the result of his own excesses, however unhealthy they may have been. He had been struck down either by the Count, or by a concealed hand at his instigation, although how this had been achieved I could not for the moment discover.

It was a nasty situation, one that gave me an unpleasant sinking feeling in the stomach. Cold-blooded murder may be entertaining to read about, but in the presence of it one’s every inclination is to recoil as rapidly and as far as possible. For this sensation there is only one antidote, and that is retribution. I must confess that at this juncture my original impulse, the murder of poor Brance, had receded far into the background of my mind, due probably to the Count’s charming manner; but this I now perceived to

be a pose, part of the goodwill of his sinister business, and I found it hard to conceal my disgust.

It was not easy to find an excuse for departure so soon after dinner, but had it been possible I would have walked out there and then, prepared to carry on the battle under our true colours instead of the false flag Steeley continued to wave. He went on chatting, regardless of what had happened, and as a means to an end I suppose he was right.

"The one thing I cannot tolerate in a pilot engaged in civil flying is insobriety," he continued, and I must confess that in that I shared his opinion. "In war-time, well, it isn't quite the same thing, and if a man is fool enough to load the dice against himself it's his own funeral. But when he accepts money for the safe transportation of his employer, then it's up to him to avoid all possible risk of letting him down."

"I quite agree with you," declared the Count. "I've told Bromfelt more than once what I think of this weakness of his. It looks as if I shall have to find a new pilot."

"I wonder you don't get your daughter to fly you," suggested Steeley casually.

"I have flown with her quite a lot," replied the Count, "but I suspect she prefers not to be encumbered with a parent who might look askance at some of her peregrinations. The modern girl will have her own way, you know, and my daughter is no exception. I suppose you don't happen to know of a pilot that would suit me?"

"It depends on how hard you are to suit," murmured Steeley quietly.

I could see that the Count was getting into a rather difficult position. I knew what he wanted to say, and I could see that Steeley was removing from his path as many obstacles as possible so that he could say it, but it was still a long jump from the ordinary employment of a pilot to the duties he would be asked to perform in this case. Dare the Count risk showing his hand? Conscious that there was an increasing tenseness in the atmosphere, I left it to him to find out, and he did, in no uncertain manner.

"You're not looking for a job yourself, I suppose?" ventured the Count presently, half jokingly.

Steeley shook his head. "Not an ordinary job of flying," he smiled. "It's too tame—much too tame. If, of course, you care to put your cards on the table, so that we can have a look at them, we might find them sufficiently interesting to be induced to—er—play."

"I pay high wages," was the Count's next offer.

“One always has to pay for highly specialised services,” prompted Steeley. “As I have already told you, we have had a pretty good all-round schooling.”

“Yes—er—yes; that’s what I was thinking,” continued the Count placidly, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

Steeley glanced at his watch. “You know, we shall have to get on faster than this if we’re going to get anywhere,” he suggested calmly. “Suppose we cut out the polite stuff and get right down to business?”

“What business?” asked the Count quickly.

Steeley went a little deeper. “Your business,” he said shortly.

The Count eyed him with renewed interest. “How much do you know about it?” he asked.

“Not very much,” admitted Steeley; “but it must be even more highly organised, and certainly more profitable, than mine was.” Then he took the plunge. “And that, incidentally is why we’re here,” he added. “Big businesses, when run on the same lines, are better merged than operating in competition against each other.”

“I understood that you hadn’t a business now,” returned the Count.

“Quite right,” granted Steeley. “But the foundations were well and truly laid, and they’re still there for the superstructure to be built on.”

The Count nodded. “I think we begin to understand each other,” he said softly; “but I must confess that you fill me with a certain uneasiness. Just how did you learn about my—er—er—business?”

“That is a secret I’m not prepared to divulge,” Steeley told him frankly. “But as you say, we begin to understand each other; so much so that I fancy it is only a matter of getting in accord on the financial side before we remove our kit from Sparling Club-house to here, or any other place you direct.”

“Would a retaining fee of five thousand a year, paid to you for your combined services, interest you?” offered the Count.

“It would not,” answered Steeley bluntly. “Ten thousand a year and commission on business actually transacted by us, would, I think, be nearer the mark. Ferrara paid me more than that.”

“Yet you bumped him off,” parried the Count.

“We would probably bump you off, too, if you turned out to be a yellow double-crosser, as Ferrara did,” observed Steeley coldly.

“I might do a little bumping off myself,” smiled the Count.

“I haven’t overlooked that,” declared Steeley grimly, “in which case, it would become a matter of who fired first. And now we all know where we are,” he concluded.

I was by no means sure of that, but we had certainly gone too far to withdraw. Most of the cards were on the table now, and it was only a case of playing them in a game which, while it fascinated me, at the same time rather appalled me. The result of one mistake was likely to be serious.

It nearly happened right on the spot. The Count had made no reply to Steeley’s last observation, but I could tell from the expression on his face that he was doing some deep thinking. He was reaching for the port when there came a second interruption, very different from the first. So unexpected was it, and in such a state of tension were my nerves, that I nearly jumped out of my chair.

It started with a swift rush outside the door, which an instant later was flung open, and a girl, panting and dishevelled, ran into the room, to be followed immediately by a hard-faced, elderly woman in nurse’s uniform. With a gasp of terror she darted right across the room, and there, facing us, seized with both hands a tall lamp standard in the way a sailor might hang on to a stanchion in a rough sea.

It all happened like lightning, but I had time to note that she was a remarkably pretty girl, tall and slim, with dark eyes, now filled with tears, and black hair, parted down the centre and brushed flat, Madonna fashion. Her face was colourless; not white, like the nightdress she wore, but the creamy tint of old ivory, although this was no doubt due largely to her obvious agitation. The amazing thing was that as I stared at her in startled surprise an extraordinary feeling came over me that I had seen her before, recently, but where I could not think; not that there was much time for thought, for the other woman had followed her with the relentlessness of a wolf on the trail of a lamb, and thereafter things happened swiftly.

Naturally, we had all jumped to our feet, and we were still standing in statuesque attitudes when the girl saw her pursuer coming, and such a moan broke from her lips as I never hope to hear again. It was at once a cry of fear, and at the same time, supplication, and if it was lost on me, and Steeley—who for once seemed at a loss to know how to act—it was not lost on Brian. Like a cat he sprang on to a chair, took the table in his stride, and was down on the other side facing the woman before she could reach her quarry.

“Hey, not so fast, you,” he snarled.

In all the skirmishes we had been in I had never seen such a look on his face before. The eyes he turned on the Count were cold and hostile. “What’s

the big idea?" he snapped.

The Count didn't move. "Stand aside," he said harshly.

"Like hell I will," flung back Brian. "A racket's a racket, but I'm not standing for any rough-housing with women."

The girl went to him like a frightened child to its mother. "Safe me," she pleaded, and I knew there was no longer any mystery about the writer of the note we had picked up on the drive.

"Stand aside," said the Count again, and this time there was something ominous in his tone.

"Not on your life," sneered Brian. "What are you doing with this girl?"

"Don't be childish. She's insane."

Brian looked swiftly at the girl and then back at the Count. "I don't believe it," he said bluntly.

"I'll give you three seconds to stand aside," said the Count, and this time there was something in his voice that made me shiver.

"Stand aside, Brian." Steeley spoke, and the words ripped out like shots from a machine-gun.

"Are *you* standing for this sort of stuff?" asked Brian bitterly.

In one leap Steeley was across the table. His fist swung round in a vicious upper-cut that caught Brian on the chin and sent him into a heap in the corner, to where the impetus of Steeley's jump also sent him. Almost simultaneously came a rasping hiss, the siphon-like noise we had heard when Bromfelt had collapsed, and a mirror on the opposite wall, in line with where Brian had been standing, shivered to splinters.

The sound was followed by an unpleasant silence. Steeley, with a glint in his eye, looked at the shattered mirror and then at the Count. "Just tell that sharp-shooter of yours not to be quite so quick on the trigger," he said angrily.

"And you tell that boy of yours to do what he's told," returned the Count promptly.

After that we all stood still while the girl, with a gesture of hopeless despair, allowed herself to be led from the room by her stony-visaged guardian. I felt like protesting, but I could see it was no use. Quite apart from completely upsetting Steeley's plans the concealed marksman had to be considered.

Brian, looking thoroughly shaken, got up, and surveyed us with undisguised disapproval. For a moment I thought he was going to say

something, and I dreaded what it might be, but evidently he thought better of it, for he resumed his seat and stared moodily into the empty fireplace.

"An unfortunate beginning," said the Count, breaking the silence. "One for which I can only apologise. The young lady you have just seen is my niece who, unhappily, suffers from delusions that necessitate her being kept in restraint. I am extremely sorry that she should have chosen such an inopportune moment to evade her nurse."

"And I am sorry that one of my friends should choose the moment for a pardonable, if uncalled-for, display of heroics," returned Steeley gravely.

"When can you be ready to commence work?" asked the Count, rather surprisingly, I thought.

"Just as soon as you like," answered Steeley.

"Then let us say to-morrow," suggested the Count. "I have a machine at Cannes, one of the Hawk type, which must be flown back here. In the meantime, suppose you fetch your things from Sparling and bring them here? I don't think there's any need for all of you to go," he went on quickly as I stood up. "I think it's a little job our young friend here"—he turned to Brian—"might do quite well. As he seems romantically inclined, I will ask my daughter to go with him for company, although, I fear, he will find it difficult to persuade her to let her heart rule her head."

He touched a bell beside him and gave a swift order in a language unknown to me to the man who answered it.

A minute later the door was again opened and the girl whom we had caught smuggling the white dog stood on the threshold. In evening dress, with a cloak thrown over her arm, she looked beautiful in what I can only describe as a rather repellent sort of way, and fresh doubts entered my head about Steeley's deductions.

"I am ready when you are," she said smoothly.

Brian joined her. "Shan't be long," he said with a nod to us, and as the door closed behind them I had a strong suspicion that we were going to find it difficult to get together again, alone.

"And now let us get down to business," said the Count.

We settled the details of the flight for the following day, not that there was much to settle, although the Count, after some reflection, propounded an odd arrangement. He proposed that we should start early and fly down to Cannes in our own Leopard-Moth, giving Helene, his daughter—who had some reason for going to the Riviera—a lift. We could have lunch at his villa at Juan les Pins, and start back in the afternoon, leaving Helene to fly back in the Hawk in her own time. There seemed to be no real reason why two of

us should go in order that one machine might be brought back, but I was anxious to have a talk with Steeley, so I did not query the point. What did seem to be rather surprising was that on arrival back in England we were not to land at the Towers, but were to take the machine back to Sparling. He further suggested we should fetch the machine from Sparling at daybreak, returning to the Towers to pick up Helene before proceeding to France, the reason for this being that it would give her a little longer to get ready. It would have been necessary for us to go to Sparling, anyway, because our passports were in the machine. The other documents necessary for the journey the Count promised to let us have in the morning, although how he proposed to do this at such short notice was more than I could work out. After this was done, we might, opined the Count, settle down to more serious work.

Brian came back presently with our suitcases and small kit, seemingly on the best of terms with Helene, who appeared to be amused about something.

"I hope you don't mind, sir, but I took you at your word, and made love to her all the way," he confessed shamelessly, after she had left the room with the footman who collected our luggage. "I didn't seem to make much progress, though."

The Count smiled. "Never mind," he said. "You may get to know Helene better later on. And now, as it's getting late, and you are to make an early start in the morning, don't you think we'd better retire?"

It was a hint we could hardly ignore, so we followed the Count into the hall, from where a dark, foreign-looking fellow, with a slight cast in one eye, showed us to our rooms which, judging from the number of stairs, were in one of the towers.

I noticed that the doors were massive, and although mine swung too easily there was an unusual heaviness about it for a bedroom door. It closed with such a firm click that it instantly aroused a suspicion in my mind, and feeling for the handle to open it again I can't say that I was altogether surprised to discover that there was none; nor was there, as far as I could make out, any other means of opening it, although there was a small square hole which looked as if it might have been intended to take a key.

Hardly knowing what to think about things, I undressed and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER X

I WAS awakened in the morning by someone drawing the blinds. I saw at a glance that it was very early, for although the sky was grey the sun had not yet risen; still, it was light enough for me to see my cross-eyed friend of the night before, and, what was more welcome, a tray with a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits standing on the bedside table.

Fallis, as the servant announced his name to be, ran me a bath in the adjacent bathroom, and as I had a quick splash and realised for the first time how far we had committed ourselves, I couldn't help wondering how the day would end. I dressed quickly, and smiling to myself as I discovered that a handle had been inserted into the hole in the door, I went downstairs. Fallis was in the hall, and showed me to the breakfast room, where I found Steeley, dressed for travel, eating buttered toast.

"Where's Brian?" I asked.

"I haven't seen him."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Steeley shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing. There's nothing we can do. I expect he'll be here when we get back."

I didn't like this idea of splitting up the party, but as Steeley had said, there was nothing we could do about it, so I ate my breakfast in silence, and waited until we started for Sparling in the car, without seeing the Count, before I expressed my thoughts.

"This business is getting me dizzy," I said, "and I don't like it. I'd much rather have gone to work the usual way and tackled the Count from the outside."

"Well, this was the way it went, and the opportunity of getting into the Count's confidence was too good to miss."

"But what are you hoping to do?"

"Get enough evidence to hang him. I'm afraid we should have found it difficult, if not impossible, to do that from the outside."

"We've only got to make one slip to get ourselves bumped off."

"We had to take that risk, anyway, however we went to work. I admit we shall have to be very careful. The Count doesn't flourish his weapons, but they lose nothing of their deadliness on that account. It was quite clear from the way he killed Bromfelt that we were being covered all the time we were talking last night. One false move and we shouldn't have known what hit us."

“Bromfelt was shot?”

“Of course. There is a spy-hole in one of the walls of that room—in the bookcase, I think.”

“What sort of weapon was it?”

“Either a powerful air-gun or an ordinary gun with a silencer attachment.”

“Well, there is this about it,” I said comfortingly. “We seem to be allowed our freedom, so if we don’t like the look of things we can always pack up and get out.”

Steeley shook his head. “Don’t gamble on that. I imagine that one of us will always be in the position of a hostage, whatever the others are doing. For instance, to bolt at this moment would be to sign Brian’s death-warrant. That, I think, is a tacit understanding between the Count and ourselves.”

“Who was that girl?”

“I’ve no idea, but you may be sure of two things. In the first place, Cortusoides has got a good reason for keeping her locked up, and in the second, there is some connection between her and the fellow who is masquerading as his daughter. No doubt we shall learn more about these things in due course.”

“If we don’t get plugged in the process.”

“You don’t like the way things are going, evidently.”

“I don’t, and that’s a fact.”

“I’ll drop you at Sparling Station if you like. That will let you out. I’ll go back and tell the Count that, after thinking things over, you decided to pack up on the proposition.”

“No, thanks. What I start I finish.”

“I had always imagined that to be the case. It was our wits against the Count’s from the time we took off on this show; we knew that; if he beats us at it, we shall undoubtedly get what we should deserve for allowing ourselves to be bested by a cosmopolitan crook who is clever, but not so clever as he thinks he is. I’m more than satisfied with the way things have gone. All we’ve got to do is to stick around, play our cards as if we were actually in his racket, and wait for him to make a bad lead.”

Personally, I was by no means sure of this, but I didn’t say so.

We turned in at the aerodrome gate, parked the car, and inside a quarter of an hour were on our way back to the Towers, by air, with full tanks. Helene and the Count were waiting for us when we landed. He handed us our papers and ample money to cover any expenses likely to be incurred,

after which, as there was nothing more to be said, we took straight off again with Helene now sitting behind us. The time was just six o'clock.

There is no need to describe the journey to the South of France, for it was uneventful. The presence of Helene made natural conversation impossible, so the flight resolved itself as far as I was concerned into a period of complete boredom. I slept most of the way, and it was with a sense of deep satisfaction that I saw the Côte d'Azur come into view beyond the parched grey peaks of the Alpes-Maritimes. The journey, I saw from the watch on the instrument board, had taken us a trifle under six hours, which was good going.

I was quite prepared for a hitch of some sort at the aerodrome, but there was none. The Hawk was still there, and a car which, in ten minutes, took us to the Count's villa at Juan, a fine place standing well back from the Cannes-Nice road on the Cap d'Antibes side.

A workman, or gardener, in blue overalls opened the gate for us, and Steeley caught my eye and winked. In spite of his elementary disguise, it was not difficult to recognise 'Monkey' Sharpe. We didn't see him again, nor did I see anything else that might even remotely suggest that the Villa was anything but what it pretended to be. Helene gave us a good lunch, lunched with us, in fact, and seemed to be in no hurry for us to go. I should have liked to have a bathe, but there was hardly time for that, so after our coffee we took a stroll round the garden, which was walled round in the usual Riviera style, where Steeley, who never seems to miss anything, found the plant with the blue flowers which the Count had described, and one of which Brian, presumably in a moment of absentmindedness, had picked and put in his buttonhole.

At two o'clock Helene, who was to return independently, told us that the car was ready to take us back to the aerodrome, so as there was no excuse for delay, we departed, and twenty minutes saw us in the air again, northward bound.

We had plenty of time for conversation now, but there was really very little to discuss. Steeley made me see his point of view that in the rôle we had chosen we stood a much better chance of success than tackling the thing in the orthodox way, from the outside, when, although we might learn a lot ourselves, we might never get enough evidence to take a case to Wayne. He supported this argument by pointing out that already we knew beyond doubt that the Count had killed, or had been responsible for, the death of three men, yet we had absolutely nothing to prove it. There were only two things that worried him, he declared. One was Wayne, who had a lamentable habit of turning up at inconvenient moments and making unfortunate observations

at the wrong time, and the other was Brian who, owing to the incident of the girl—which had obviously affected him—might lose his head and do something rash on his own account.

We were still discussing these things when, through the purple haze of twilight, the Channel came into view, for which I was thankful, for if there is anything more tiring than sitting in the enclosed cabin of a small aeroplane for six hours on end I have yet to discover it.

We cleared Customs at Shoreham, and then, with darkness rapidly closing in around us, we roared down the coast hoping to reach Sparling before the light went altogether. In this we were not successful, however, but Steeley made a good landing, and taxied slowly towards the hangar.

"And so ends a perfect day," I observed tritely. "No trouble and no shocks."

"The day is not yet over," Steeley reminded me with a sidelong glance.

"Well, it's all been plain sailing so far, anyway," I answered wittily. "Have you any reason to doubt that this desirable state of affairs will continue?"

Steeley made a noncommittal gesture with his left hand. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't mentioned it before, but I don't mind admitting that when we started on this trip I was quite prepared for something unforeseen to crop up."

"Why?"

"Paradoxically, for no other reason than because it all seemed so perfectly straightforward, whereas I cannot help feeling that anything the Count has a hand in is crooked. Ah! well, here we are." Steeley switched off, and we both got out.

Instantly I was aware of several figures running towards us. My first impression was, not unnaturally, that they were mechanics, and vaguely I wondered where they had all sprung from. They came from the dark shadow of the hangar, and just before they reached the machine they began to spread out, fan-wise. With a mild shock I saw that they were policemen, and I looked round quickly to see who or what they were after.

"What the devil——?" I began, but Steeley cut me short.

"It's us they're after," he said. "Leave this to me."

To my utter astonishment the policemen did not satisfy themselves by merely surrounding the machine. Both my arms were seized with a grip of iron, and before I realised what was happening, a pair of handcuffs had been snapped on my wrists.

“What the hell do you think you’re playing at?” I cried indignantly.

“Now, now, take it easy,” said a well-known voice in the darkness.

“Wayne!” I exclaimed incredulously. “Don’t tell me you’re responsible for this damned nonsense.”

“We’ll see whether it’s nonsense or not in a minute,” answered Wayne tersely. Then, turning to his men, “All right, get ’em into the hangar.”

I nearly boiled over at the undignified way in which I was led—dragged, might be a better word—into the hangar, in which lights had now appeared; and there we stood for a good five minutes in the centre of a circle of half a dozen policemen until Wayne appeared again. In his hands he held a number of small parcels, done up in brown paper. Without speaking he put them on a test-bench, tore one open, poured some white powder into his hand and sniffed it. Then he eyed us mockingly.

“You’re a smart pair, I’ll give you that,” he said admiringly. “And to think I let you put it across me. Got anything to say—not forgetting that anything you do say may be used as evidence——”

“Oh, cut the cackle, Wayne,” growled Steeley. “What is this stuff?”

Wayne laughed aloud. Clearly he was very pleased with himself. “Oh, come off it,” he jeered. “That sort of talk won’t help you any. Ten pounds of cocaine, and you didn’t even know you had it aboard, I suppose? Well, well, that will be a good story to tell the judge.”

“I cleared Customs at Shoreham,” Steeley told him curtly.

“Cleared is a good word,” smiled Wayne. “You didn’t declare this, I’ll bet.”

“Where did you find it?”

“Where you put it; under a wad of oily waste in the tool container. Now tell me you didn’t know you had a tool container. Don’t waste your breath. Come on, boys, let’s get along. Jones, Briden, Grey, you can start back on your bicycles. Lea, stay here with the machine. Fletcher and Payne, you come back with me.”

We were bundled into a saloon car, which at once set off down the road.

“Where did you get this idea, Wayne?” asked Steeley presently. “Don’t tell me you thought of it yourself.”

“Oh no,” admitted the detective. “Well, I suppose there’s no harm in your knowing. Your pal the Count tipped me off. Why you were mugs enough to tell him beats me. I suppose he thought it was a sort of tit for tat for you pulling my leg about him.”

I caught Steeley's eye, and I could see that he was more than a little shaken by this revelation, but he said no more.

We turned out of the lane that served the aerodrome on to the secondary road that led to Sparling village, and my brain was still in a whirl when, with a jar and a screech, the constable who was driving jammed on the brakes.

"What's wrong?" asked Wayne sharply.

"Tree down, sir, by the look of it."

"That's a nuisance. If we can't get through we shall have to turn round and go by the other way," muttered Wayne angrily as, with the driver, he got down to see if it was possible to clear a passage through the old elm that lay in an appalling tangle right across the road.

"Stick 'em up and keep 'em up," said a voice in the darkness.

Whatever else Wayne was, he was no coward. I saw his hand go to his pocket, but simultaneously four masked men, with levelled revolvers, stepped out of the surrounding darkness.

"I don't want to kill you, policeman, but if that gun comes out of your pocket I shall have to," said the same speaker as before.

Wayne looked around helplessly. Apparently he was the only one armed, and against four men resistance would have merely been suicide. Fortunately he knew it.

Two of the new-comers kept Wayne and his companion covered while the other two came to the car.

"O.K. boss," one of them told me cheerfully. "Come on down."

It took only a minute to find the key of the handcuffs and set us free. Steeley and I were then led round to the other side of the tree, where a big car with no lights on, but with its engine running, was waiting for us. Another minute and we were tearing down the road, leaving the policemen and their car on the far side of the tree, as helpless as if they had been on the other side of a precipice.

Then, and not before, did I see through the whole cunning scheme, and knew that we had made an irreparable blunder in allowing ourselves to be rescued. Left alone, we might have succeeded in convincing Wayne of the truth, but now it would be impossible. Hopelessly incriminated, we were fugitives, and would remain so.

Not a word was spoken during the remainder of the drive. I guessed where we were going, and I guessed correctly, for racing through the village of Dimcote we swung through the open gates of the Towers and pulled up in front of the house.

“Clever move,” whispered Steeley in my ear as we got out. “Whatever you do, keep your temper.”

The car went off as we walked in. The lounge door was open, so we walked through. The Count was sitting there with the decanter and glasses on the table.

“Your dinner is ready, but after your tiring day I thought perhaps you would like a short one first,” he said sympathetically.

“Thanks. As a matter of fact, I would,” answered Steeley imperturbably.

“Everything go off all right?”

“From your point of view, perfectly,” smiled Steeley. “From ours, not so good. Wayne is now even more convinced that we are a couple of smart guys. But why sacrifice a perfectly good aeroplane, and as much ‘snow’ as would have bought another, merely to prove to Wayne what he already suspected?”

“I don’t believe in half measures,” answered the Count suavely. “That’s one of the reasons why I’m successful. I feel that we have now established ties that will keep us very close together. You will agree, I think, that the very last place Wayne will look for you, is here; so, as I said last night, we can settle down to work without any fear of your leaving me without giving notice.”

“Yes, I think you can count on that,” agreed Steeley simply. “By the way, where’s Brian?”

The Count made a movement of apology. “I’m afraid he’s gone.”

“Gone!”

“Yes, the silly fellow made an abortive attempt to rescue my niece by getting on to the roof, so rather than run the risk of letting him hurt himself I had to lock him up and give him a serious talking to. I asked him to promise that he would never do such a thing again, and would you believe it, he refused. So what could I do?”

Steeley’s face set like a grey mask. “You haven’t——”

“Oh no, no, nothing like that,” protested the Count reproachfully. “I’ve merely sent him off for a short holiday. In order to keep him quiet I’ve allowed my niece to go with him, so they’ll be together, and therefore, I hope, happy.”

Steeley poured himself out a drink. “It’s a pity about that,” he said reflectively. “He’s a useful kid.”

“That’s what I thought,” agreed the Count. “But there, you may have an opportunity of having a talk with him shortly, in which case you might try to

convince him of the error of his ways. But you must see that I cannot afford to take risks."

"Absolutely."

"I thought you would. Then suppose we go through to dinner?" suggested the Count.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER dinner the Count gave us an insight into his real business. To me, this seemed to be a wholly unnecessary risk, at complete variance with all the generally accepted precepts of crime, both in fact and fiction. Nevertheless, there was a lot of sound logic in his reasoning.

"If," he explained, "I told you nothing, you would, naturally, be curious to know just what was going on, with the result that your efficiency might be impaired. In other words, instead of devoting yourselves entirely to the particular job on hand, you might be tempted to delay or jeopardise the issue for no other reason than to satisfy a pardonable sense of curiosity. Again, it in more than likely that you would sooner or later be able to satisfy that curiosity, so it might as well be satisfied at the outset, when the hazards I have already touched upon lightly would not arise. There is another reason which I shall come to presently, but speaking generally, my considered policy is to be absolutely frank with my assistants except in one respect, which is this. I do not divulge their identities to each other. I know them all. To me they each have direct lines of communication, but not with one another. In this way, working with what we might call a number of watertight compartments, if by any unfortunate chance one gets flooded, the others are not in the least affected. I must say that in this I was guided by a very bitter experience in my early days." The Count sipped his liqueur reflectively.

"In 1914," he continued, "I was undergoing a course of instruction in espionage in the Wilhelmstrasse which, as you are doubtless aware, was the headquarters of the German Secret Service. I was not necessarily an enemy of Great Britain, you understand. There, the general policy was the very opposite from what I practise here. Each agent working in England was encouraged to know his colleagues. The result was that when the first one made a blunder it was fatal to them all; your counter-agents had only to follow a single well-defined thread to locate the rest. In this way more than

twenty carefully placed agents were arrested on the first day of the war, and the whole espionage system of the Central Powers at once resembled a spider's web through which a bird had flown. You follow me?"

Steeley nodded. "Perfectly," he murmured.

"Very well. My organisation is modelled on different lines, chiefly as a result of that experience. Broadly speaking, no matter what happens to one, the others have no cause for alarm. They cannot give each other away, for, as I have said, they do not know each other. In only one respect are they connected, which brings me to the other matter I wish to speak to you about. They are all members of a common guild. Each pays into a central fund a sum of money which is, in effect, a premium for insurance. In the event of things going wrong with any member, the best possible legal aid is at once at his disposal. Should this fail, no stone is left unturned to procure his freedom. The recent case of 'Monkey' Sharpe provides an example of what I mean. Further, dependants are provided for during the entire absence of a breadwinner, no matter how long it may be, and I may say that this arrangement has proved so popular among certain—er—free-lance members of the community, that they have, voluntarily, through members of my staff, paid in contributions in order to share the benefits I have just described. I invite you to do the same."

"How much does all this cost?" asked Steeley, with real interest.

"Ten per cent of your earnings, annually. In your case, you wouldn't actually pay the money; it would be deducted automatically from your salary."

"The premium seems rather heavy."

"The benefits are substantial. Not long ago five thousand pounds were spent on a single case. Admittedly, nearly three thousand of that went in bribes, but as we were successful in securing our man's release it was money well spent. At the time he was penniless. Without the organisation behind him he would now be wasting several useful years of his life in conditions far from ideal."

"There must be a lot of people in this thing to make such expenditure possible," suggested Steeley.

"There are. I may as well admit that almost everyone of note in what the Press is pleased to call the underworld is a member. You see, the scheme operates in many ways. For example, as you probably know, one of the most successful methods the police employ for obtaining information, although they do not, for obvious reasons, over-publicise it, is that of allowing it to be known among certain classes that a reward will be paid for information

leading to an arrest, and no embarrassing questions asked. We have offset that by allowing it to be known among the same people that we are always prepared to pay double what the police are offering, on the understanding, of course, that the information furnished to us is not repeated elsewhere. Should anyone be so ill-advised as to attempt to collect the reward from both sides, we should at once know it through our agents in the police force, and his life would pay forfeit."

"But aren't you afraid that someone will one day spill the beans?"

The Count shook his head. "It might happen, of course, but we have taken every possible step to safeguard ourselves. Do you remember rumours, during the war, of a remarkable organisation—actually, it was a document—called the Forty-Seven Thousand?"

"Vaguely," admitted Steeley.

"Then let me refresh your memory. The scheme was typically Teutonic in its conception. The Forty-Seven Thousand were just that number of names which included people in all ranks of society. Against each name was entered every indiscretion, every folly, every vice, made by the person concerned. Everyone makes a mistake at some time or other. You will perceive that the people on this remarkable list were very much in the hands of those who held it."

"Sort of blackmail *de luxe*."

"I don't like your choice of words, but as it describes the situation exactly, we will let it pass. Our list does not carry forty-seven thousand names, but the information set down against each name which does appear, is—what shall we say?—extremely personal."

"All these people have committed an indiscretion at some time or other, I presume?"

"Nearly all or them. In the negative cases I repaired the omission."

"As in our case to-night?"

"Precisely. In your case, however, Scotland Yard has, or will soon have, a record of your lapse. That is not always the case. We have on our books the names of many who are, to all intents and purposes, law-abiding citizens."

"Yours, for example?"

A faint smile crossed the Count's face. "My name does not appear," he said quietly. "With your usual perception, you will see the wisdom of that."

"I hope you don't leave this book lying about?"

"Oh, dear, no. It is in very safe custody."

All the while this conversation had been going on an increasing suspicion had been forming in my mind that the Count was really proud of his efforts, and if this was so, his vanity might be the key to unlock the chain of evidence we were trying to obtain. The enormity of the scheme fairly took my breath away. Steeley had expressed an opinion that the Count's activities were far-reaching, but this exceeded my wildest imagination. It began to look as if he was, in fact, the prince of crooks adored by the thrill-loving public, but pooh-poohed by the police.

"Well, I think I've told you everything now," went on the Count. "May I take it that you wish to become a *bona fide* member of the organisation?"

"Of course," answered Steeley without hesitation. "We might not always be as lucky as we were to-night."

"Quite so," agreed the Count, "and I'm afraid you have a busy time in front of you. Aircraft, as you may have guessed, play a major part in my operations. I want you to do something for me to-morrow, if you will."

I'd pricked up my ears. What next, I wondered.

"Have you ever flown to Germany?" was the Count's next question.

Steeley smiled. "Yes," he said. "We certainly have."

"Never been in trouble there, I hope?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"Good. It might have been awkward if you had. Now this is the proposition. It is quite simple; I want you to fly a passenger there to-morrow."

"You mean, both of us are to go?"

"You will each fly a machine. It is a matter of vital importance that your passenger reaches his destination safely. It would not do for him to land in France, or you, for that matter, while in his company. It would mean Devil Island for all of you, and I doubt if even the entire resources of the organisation could save you. By taking two machines the risk of such a catastrophe is lessened, if not entirely removed. One of you will fly Mr. X. The other will follow. In the unfortunate event of the passenger machine making a forced landing, the second one will land, pick up the others after they have set fire to their machine, and take them on to the destination."

"But can we get to Germany and back without landing for fuel?" asked Steeley quickly.

"Both machines are fitted with reserve tanks that give an ample supply."

"Where are we to drop Mr. X?"

The Count took a folded sheet of very thin tracing paper from his pocket and opened it out on the table. “Here is your objective,” he said, pointing with his forefinger. “Just over the French frontier, near Luxemburg. Here is your landing-ground, on the estate of the Saarenschloss, which is on the west bank of the Mozelle. It should not be difficult to find. When you get there you will find friends who will attend to your needs and provide you with accommodation for the night, so that you need not start back until the following day.”

“All we have to do is fly Mr. X there and then come back?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound a very formidable task,” smiled Steeley.

“You should have no difficulty whatever,” returned the Count confidently. “Keep out of the way of French military aircraft, though, should you see any. I have a report—how true it is I have not yet been able to confirm—that the French are watching all aeroplanes on their eastern frontier very closely on account of the recent trouble in the Rhineland. By the way, don’t ask Mr. X questions that may embarrass him; he has a mission to perform.”

“Is he taking anything with him?”

“Yes.”

“Need he go? Couldn’t we take it?”

“It is essential that he reports in person. That is a matter outside my hands.”

“All right. What time do we start?”

“As soon after dawn as you wish. You’ll find the machines waiting for you on the aerodrome. Let me know the hour you decide to start, so that I can warn Mr. X to be ready.”

“Where is he now?”

“Upstairs, resting.”

Steeley lit a cigarette. “Well, that all seems clear enough,” he observed. “I think we’ll turn in early, too.”

“Would you care to see the evening paper before you go?” suggested the Count in such a way that I knew he had some reason for saying it. He passed the paper to Steeley.

Glancing over his shoulder I saw that air news was a front-page story. A night watchman had been murdered in mysterious circumstances at the Royal Aircraft Experimental Establishment, Farnborough, but I skipped this when another headline caught my eye. The paragraph, which was quite

brief, reported a fatal crash that had occurred early in the day near Winchester. A farm labourer, seeing some smoke rising from a wood, had gone to investigate. To his horror he had found the smouldering wreckage of an aeroplane, one of an old type, it was thought. The body of the pilot had been burned beyond all recognition, but from a metal cigarette-case in his pocket it was thought that he was a professional pilot named Bromfelt, who had at one time been in the employ of Southern Airways, Limited.

I turned away, feeling suddenly sick, and glancing at the Count saw a ghost of a smile playing about the corners of his thin lips.

"The number of flying accidents lately is becoming really alarming," he said suavely. "But there, they're quickly forgotten," he added meaningly.

It was, I realised, the Brance business all over again. Three murders the Count had committed to our certain knowledge, yet each one had been recorded as an accident. I turned away and lit a cigarette, so that he could not see my face.

"Come on, Steeley," I said. "I think it's time to go to bed."

"I think so, too," he agreed.

CHAPTER XII

At eight thousand feet, under a blue sky, my machine, on nine-tenths throttle, kicked the air behind her at a steady hundred and fifty miles an hour. At the same height, a mile in front of me and heading eastward, was another machine of the same type, with Steeley at the controls and Mr. X sitting behind him.

It was funny to be flying a machine of unknown make, yet such was the case. As the Count had promised, the two aeroplanes were waiting for us on the tarmac when we reached it shortly after daybreak, and there had been no time for a close examination, for with our appearance two mechanics—both foreigners, I fancy, by the look of them—started the engines, and then looked at us in a manner which suggested that we were expected to take off right away.

I had time to notice only one thing beyond the fact that they were high-winged monoplanes of the open cockpit type, painted black all over. The white registration letters of my machine, which, incidentally, were British, were not painted on in the usual way, but seemed to have been cut out of

some white material and pasted on. I doubt if I should have noticed this, but for the fact that the corner of the letter G on the fuselage of my machine had become slightly unstuck, and was flapping loose. Mr. X was there before us, for on our arrival he stepped out of the hangar and looked at us inquiringly, obviously waiting to be told in which machine he was to fly. He was an ordinary-looking fellow, small, with a rather pale, nervous face. I couldn't see much of him, for he was dressed in flying kit, cap, goggles, and leather coat, below which appeared the legs of an ordinary dark lounge suit. He carried no luggage of any sort. Steeley assisted him into the back seat of his machine in accordance with the arrangement we had made on the way down, and then gave me the nod to take off. There was no sign of the Count, not that I had expected to see him, for we already had our instructions.

In the cockpit I learned that my machine was not of English manufacture, for the instruments were lettered in metres and litres, which was rather disconcerting, as I had no conversion tables on me, and mental arithmetic is not my strong point. However, I took off and headed east.

Presently Steeley passed me, and setting a course for our destination, left me to fall in line behind him, which I did, keeping anything from half a mile to a mile behind. There was no need to get any nearer, as visibility was perfect, without a cloud in the sky.

In this way we crossed the Channel, and hitting the coast just below Cap Gris Nez, settled down on an easterly course for our objective. The minute hand of the watch on my instrument board completed a circle without my once having to touch the rudder. Another hour passed in the same way, and still we roared on through the crystal-clear air. I had long ago given up trying to make out just where we were: I left that to Steeley; he was leading, and all I had to do was to keep him in sight; but when another three-quarters of an hour had passed, I suddenly found myself recognising landmarks, and knew that we were over the Department of Ardennes, in which sector of the front I had fought some of my battles during the war.

It induced a queer sensation, this page out of a never-to-be-forgotten past, as it were, and I flew along through a sea of retrospection. There was the sunken road down which I had once chased a troop of Uhlans. There was the queer triangular-shaped wood which had once concealed a remarkably accurate Archie battery. It was somewhere near here that I had got my first balloon. "Ah, well," I thought. "Things have altered since then. Funny to think there was once a time when to show one's nose in this particular section of atmosphere was to invite trouble. Archie—tracer—— There were things of the past. No more——"

I came back to reality with a rush, as to my ears was borne the unmistakable chatter of a machine-gun. Unbelievingly I looked about me, and there was no need to look far. Sitting right beside me was a dark-painted aeroplane carrying the blue, white, and red markings of the French Air Force. It was a two-seater—Breguet, I think; with one hand resting on a wicked-looking double machine-gun, the begoggled gunner was pointing sternly downward with the other.

In a terrible fit of panic I looked frantically ahead for Steeley. To my unspeakable consternation he had disappeared. Leaning far out over the side of the cockpit I looked again, first above and then below. Then I saw him. He was going down, tail cocked high, about three thousand feet below me. Roaring down behind him were two more French machines.

I started violently, and my mouth went dry as the machine-gun chattered again, this time almost in my ears, it seemed. Looking up, I was just in time to see a sparkle of white flash across my nose. It's no use denying it, the sight turned me stone cold, and for the first time I realised what *anno Domini* can do to a man. Admittedly, I was unarmed, but even so, I knew that my dog-fighting days were over. Were they? A flicker of the old abandon touched a chord inside me, and I looked across at the other pilot. His face was turned towards me; he had pushed up his goggles, presumably to see me more clearly, and I noticed that he was little more than a boy. Was I, a war-scarred veteran, to fold my wings at the bidding of this upstart fledgling?

I saw that the gunner was training his gun on me with unpleasant deliberation, and realised that if he meant it, at such a range he could hardly miss. A little fountain of anger began to bubble up in me. "All right, my cock," I snarled. "Come on, I'll show you the way we used to do it." With that I kicked out my left foot, slammed the stick over, and went plunging down into the void.

Once started, all fear vanished. The long vista of placid years since 1918 closed up into a single day, were as if they had never been. I was back in the past—cool, war-conscious, confident. With every nerve tingling I pulled up my nose and cut the throttle; as she stalled, I kicked out my left foot, and at the same time dragged the stick back into my right thigh. For a moment the machine hung, with the controls sloppy; built with stability as the chief factor, the machine responded to such treatment sluggishly, but once she started to spin, as she was bound to, I held her in it mercilessly. As I spun I looked back over my shoulder, and saw the Frenchman following me down in a deep side-slip; but he was already far behind, and I knew he lacked the

nerve to throw his machine about with the complete disregard for consequences that only war training can produce.

Where was Steeley? At a thousand feet I pulled out of the spin in the direction in which I had last seen him. For a moment the world continued to spin about me, but as it slowed down I saw him, and my heart sank. He was about two miles away, dropping down into quite a small field bounded on two sides by woods, obviously preparing to land. Circling with him were the two French machines.

There was no time to wonder what had happened. Whatever it was, it was serious, I knew, or he would not be behaving in such a manner, so I took the only course open to me. Pushing my nose down, I raced towards the spot, and side-slipped down into the same field, my wheels touching just as Steeley's machine ran to a stop near the edge of the wood on the far side. A glance upward showed the three Breguets preparing to follow us in.

Tail up, I tore across the field, my one idea being to get as close to Steeley as possible, no thought of an obstruction in my mind. I didn't see the ditch until I was right on top of it, and then it was too late to do anything. I did what I could. I kicked hard on left rudder, so hard that I thought the undercarriage must go, but it stood up to the strain—not that it was any use. Another foot and I should have been all right, but inches count in such cases. Running almost parallel with the ditch my starboard wheel just went over the brink. That did it. Instantly we tipped up on one side; the starboard wing-tip hit the ground, and over we went in as pretty a cartwheel as anyone ever saw.

I wasn't hurt in the least. Unbuckling my belt I dropped out of my seat and ran towards Steeley, now struggling with something in the rear cockpit of his machine. I saw that it was Mr. X. He managed to get him down, and one glance at his face as I ran up told me all I needed to know. Too much. That ghastly waxy kind of sweat on the forehead could only mean one thing, and if the poor devil wasn't already dead, it could only be a matter of seconds.

"My God, Steeley!" I gasped hoarsely. "How did this happen?"

"One of those fellows shot at me without warning. Maybe it was meant to be a warning—I don't know. They came from behind. It was my own fault, I wasn't expecting anything like this."

Looking up I saw that one of the Frenchmen was already on the ground, taxying towards us. "Come on," I urged, starting to climb into his machine. "Let's get out of this."

“No use,” he said calmly, kneeling down and undoing the unconscious man’s flying coat. I saw that his fingers were wet with blood.

“Why not?” I cried aghast.

“Engine’s gone. A bullet must have cut an ignition wire or the main petrol lead.”

“My God! Then we are in a mess,” I muttered.

“Go and set fire to your machine; I’ll do the same to this one.” Steeley took a bulky packet of papers from the dead man’s pocket and put them in his own. “Look lively,” he said, wiping his fingers on the grass. “We’d better get into this wood.”

If we hoped to escape, there was indeed little time to lose. All three French machines were now on the ground, and the nearest was not more than thirty or forty yards away. Out of the corner of my eye, as I ran towards the wreck of my machine, I saw smoke going up from Steeley’s. He lifted the body of Mr. X and began to carry it clear of the flames that would presently arise.

The pilot of the nearest Breguet was shouting at me in French, but his prop was still ticking over, and I couldn’t hear what he said. Not that I should have taken any notice, anyway. Somehow it never occurred to me to suggest staying and brazening it out; I think it was what the Count had said about Devil Island that made such a course distasteful.

I had no difficulty in setting fire to my machine. Either the tank or a petrol pipe had been damaged in the crash, for it fairly reeked of petrol. Striking a match I tossed it into the debris and jumped clear; and it was as well that I did, for with a terrifying *whoosh*, a sheet of flame leapt skyward. By the grace of God the pilot of the nearest Breguet hadn’t the sense to swing his machine broadside on, for if he had, the gunner could have covered me with his machine-gun, or plastered me had he felt so inclined. As it was, he started to climb out, brandishing a pistol, but I wasn’t in the least afraid of that, so I sprinted for all I was worth back to Steeley, now waiting for me at the edge of the wood.

“This looks like a bad business,” was all he said, as he dived into the undergrowth.

“Bad?” I echoed bitterly. “It looks worse than that to me.”

“Maybe you’re right, but there’s no sense in getting into a panic.” Steeley laid his hand on my arm, listened for a moment, and then began to swing round towards the left.

“What’s the idea?” I asked.

“I just want to see what they’re up to.”

Cautiously we made our way back to the edge of the wood, some seventy or eighty yards from the spot where we had entered it, a point where it swung round slightly, giving us a side view of the situation. As I expected, the Frenchmen had all dismounted and were clustered round the dead man. One was kneeling and seemed to be going through his pockets, while the others leaned over, watching with interest.

Steeley caught my wrist in his hand. “This is our chance,” he said quietly, and, almost pulling me off my feet, made a dash for the nearest Breguet.

Once I spotted his plan, which was fairly obvious, I needed no urging. Steeley took a flying leap over the ditch that had caused my downfall, and I followed, but not being quite so long in the leg, was not so successful. I cleared it, but stumbled and went down with a bang that knocked the wind out of me; by the time I was on my feet again a shout warned me that we had been seen. Steeley was already swinging himself up into the cockpit of the Breguet, and the bellow of the engine as he grabbed the throttle was like a triumphant symphony. Puffing like a walrus, I reached the machine. Somehow I managed to get my foot into the stirrup and the machine at once started to move, for the Frenchmen were coming full pelt, shooting as they ran. Bumping and bouncing over molehills and God knows what else, we raced down the field in a down-wind take off. I pulled myself up by the gun and pitched head-first into the seat.

By the time I had righted myself our tail had lifted, but the wheels showed no signs of unsticking. With horrified eyes I saw the poplars at the far end of the field fairly leaping towards us, and a thought suddenly struck me that I was dreaming. These things really didn’t happen.

A ridge shot us into the air. For a moment we hung, half stalling, then we picked up and zoomed at the trees. I covered my face with my hands, for it seemed impossible to clear them. Nothing happened, so I opened eyes again. We were in the air, climbing steeply, with the field, its smoking wrecks and two frantically taxying Breguets slipping away under our tail.

Steeley looked back at me and grinned, a luxury he seldom permitted himself. “Who says all the fun has gone out of flying?” he roared.

“Fun?” I groaned. “My God! You call this fun?”

Our nose swung round to the north-east, and I sank down, appalled when I realised where we were making for. “If he’s going to take this kite into Germany, our little show looks like ending with another European war,” I thought helplessly.

CHAPTER XIII

STEELEY didn't attempt to climb very high. As soon as he was well off he held the nose of the machine down and began that crazy manœuvre sometimes known as hedge-hopping, or contour-chasing, and this he kept up for half an hour, by which time, what with one thing and another, I was beginning to feel sick. What happened to the other two Breguets I don't know, for I never saw them again, although I kept a lookout for them.

From our low altitude we had only a limited view of the landscape, but Steeley seemed to know his way. Occasionally he zoomed high, to look around for landmarks I suppose, from which I gathered that he had paid more attention to the map before starting than I had.

It was on one of these zooms that the end of our flight really began. I had been staring at the ground which for the most part was under cultivation, vines chiefly, although heavily wooded hills rose up here and there, when, looking up, I saw a great cloud of black smoke directly in front of us. Steeley began to turn away from it. But with a blinding flash, a bang, and a resultant bump that made me clutch at the edge of the cockpit, another cloud appeared, closer this time. For a second or two I stared at it before it was borne dimly to my aching brain that we were being "archied." There was no need for me to tell Steeley; clearly, he was already aware of it, for he began zig-zagging in the manner in which, in the old days, we used to come home across the lines if we were very low down.

Several more bursts appeared around us, much too close to be comfortable, and for the first time I realised how much progress had been made with anti-aircraft guns since the war. So far, however, except for one or two pieces of shrapnel through the wings, we hadn't been hit, but I had had enough of it, and my sole idea was to get my feet on the ground as quickly as possible, no matter what might happen afterwards.

A movement over our tail caught my eye, and looking back with a start I saw half a dozen aeroplanes with swastikas painted on their tails, coming across at an angle to cut us off. That was enough for me. Leaning forward, I beat Steeley on the back of the head with my fist.

"Hi! Get down," I yelled. "Look!" I pointed a quivering finger at the new-comers.

He turned to look, and at that moment, after one or two warning splutters, the engine cut out dead. To this day I've no idea what happened to it. As far as we were concerned it was finished, and Steeley did the only thing left for him to do. Down went his nose, and over the side went his

head, looking for a place to land on. There wasn't much choice. Not far away, on our right, a wide, shallow river ran parallel with our course; beyond it, steep, darkly-wooded hills made any idea of landing an aeroplane in that direction out of the question. Immediately below us and to the left were vineyards often hedged by spire-like conifers, and dotted here and there with houses, some large and some small. It was, in fact, typical wine-country landscape. There were one or two pastures, with cows grazing in them, but none was large enough for a light aeroplane to get into, much less a heavy war machine, so it began to look as if we were in for a crash.

Curiously enough, I didn't think of the river. Steeley did, but not until he was gliding over it, losing height as he followed its winding course, did I grasp his intention. Down we went, and I braced myself for a ducking.

It is difficult to estimate the depth of water from above, however transparent it may be. When no more than twenty feet above the river, which was as clear as gin, I was still unable to gauge its depth. I could see the bottom clearly, gravel for the most part, with dark green patches of long trailing weed, but had I been compelled to give an opinion, I should have said about ten feet. Actually, it couldn't have been more than ten inches, and except for a cloud of spray, we made a perfectly normal landing. Before our wheels touched, however, the course of the river had taken us into a steep valley with thickly wooded hills on either side, and as far as I could make out, there was no one in sight; that is, no one except the pilots of the German aeroplanes now circling above us. They were kept fairly high on account of the hills, but I knew that they could see us quite plainly.

"This, I am afraid, is where we have to start walking," said Steeley, as he stepped down into the stream.

"What river is this?" I asked as I followed him.

"The Mozelle—or, at least, I hope it is. If it isn't, then I've no idea what it is. We had better get out of sight under these trees." He led the way into the twilit fir forest on the left bank, and set off at a fast pace in the same direction as the river was flowing. Fortunately, there was little or no undergrowth to hinder our passage.

"I assume we're in Germany," I observed presently, as we trudged along.

"We are," he agreed.

"We also seem to be in a damned awkward jam."

"Looks that way, I must admit."

"How far are we from the Schloss; I suppose that's where you're making for?"

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we can be far. I had been on the lookout for it for some minutes when the Archie started. It should be along here somewhere, on this bank, according to the Count’s map.”

“He’s not going to be pleased when he hears what’s happened,” I observed grimly. “I know you acted for the best, but I can’t help thinking that you must have been crazy to bring a French kite into Germany. Relations are strained enough as it is; if this doesn’t cause an international situation, I shall be surprised.”

“We had to get out of France at any cost, and I took what seemed to be our only chance,” he replied shortly. “We shouldn’t have got out any other way, you can bet your life on that. There’s a nice old hornets’ nest buzzing behind us by this time, I’ll warrant, and I’d sooner there were a dozen international situations than we should find ourselves in Marseilles, waiting to be shipped to Devil Island. Let’s keep going, we’re not doing so badly.”

“How on earth will the French be able to account for a Breguet landing in the Mozelle?”

“They’ll have to say they knew nothing about it, which will be true enough. If a pair of madmen steal an aeroplane and dump it in another country, surely the people of that country can’t be blamed for it.”

“Can’t they! They will, in this case. There’ll be some dirty looks handed out when a party of French mechanics come to fetch the machine back, particularly if it happens to embody anything of a secret nature that no one outside France is supposed to know anything about. By the way, are you going to deliver the documents you took off Mr. X to the people at the Schloss?”

“That was my idea.”

“And what then?”

“Leave it to them to find a way of getting us back to England. It shouldn’t be very difficult.”

“Well, it all seems a crazy business to me,” I muttered. “I can’t see how this is going to put a noose round the Count’s neck.”

“You will, if you’re patient, unless we get one round ours first,” Steeley told me with engaging nonchalance.

For the best part of an hour we hurried along, meeting no one and hearing nothing except the soothing murmur of the stream, the bank of which we had followed to prevent us from getting off our course. Then, abruptly, the trees ended, and we found ourselves looking over a broad expanse of parkland.

“This begins to look like the place we’re bound for,” murmured Steeley cheerfully. “I should say that the Schloss is round the next bend, looking up the valley to the left; they used to favour such sites years ago.”

A well-defined track—it could hardly be called a road—now appeared, meandering through the grass near the river-bank, and this we followed until an imposing, stone-built, many turreted building came into sight about a quarter of a mile ahead.

Steeley stopped. “That looks like it,” he said. “I hope these papers didn’t get in too much mess,” he added, removing from his pocket the packet of documents he had taken from the unlucky Mr. X. “They were unpleasantly close to a bullet hole,” he explained.

There was no need for him to tell me that, for one side of the packet was smeared with blood.

“That isn’t very pretty, is it?” he said whimsically, turning up his nose in disgust. “I wonder what all this is about, anyway.” He removed the rubber band which held the documents together.

It turned out to be, not a number of documents as we supposed, but a single large sheet which had been folded up like a concertina. With a crisp crackle Steeley unfolded the stiff paper and spread the sheet out on the ground, when the first thing that caught my eye was several sheets of type-written foolscap pinned to the top left-hand corner. At the head of the top one had been stamped in large purple letters, AIR MINISTRY. SECRET. For some seconds neither of us spoke.

“Good God Almighty,” I breathed at last, as I realised that we were looking at the General Arrangement drawings and Specification of a secret British fighting aeroplane. The story in last night’s evening paper about the murder of the watchman at the Royal Aircraft Establishment came back to my mind with a rush.

Steeley said nothing.

“For heaven’s sake, burn it,” I said, groping for my matches in a fit of sheer funk.

Steeley glanced up at me. “This is the original drawing, not a print. It may be the only one in existence. If we destroy it we may destroy years of work. We must take it back.”

“How?”

“Don’t ask me, I don’t know; but we shall have to manage it somehow.” Steeley quickly folded the sheet and replaced it in his breast pocket.

Hardly had he done so when an open touring car came round the corner of a wood between us and the Schloss; it was heading in our direction, and clearly making the fastest time possible over the rough track.

"Hadn't we better get back into the wood?" I suggested nervously.

"I don't think so. If they've come from the Schloss they should be friends," answered Steeley, gazing steadily at the advancing car. "Even if they haven't come from the Schloss there's no need for us to worry, because I don't see, coming as they are from the opposite direction, how they can know anything about the Breguet. We——" His voice trailed away, and a most peculiar look came over his face. "Would you believe it?" he said quietly. "Just look who's here."

At first I couldn't believe my eyes, for there, in the front seat next to a black-shirted driver, sat the Count. Behind him, with two more black-shirts mounting conspicuous swastikas on their arms, sat Helene.

As the car stopped we walked up to it. There was no point in doing anything else.

"Glad to see you," said Steeley earnestly.

"What's happened?" asked the Count in a tense voice. "I thought it might be you."

Steeley raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"I heard over the telephone about a French military aeroplane with two civilians in it," explained the Count. "Where is your passenger?"

"I am very sorry, but I'm afraid he's been killed," answered Steeley simply.

For a moment the Count stared at him. Then he drew a deep breath. "Get in the car," he said.

The two black-shirts in the back seat got out to make room for us, and started walking back along the track as the car was reversed. Nothing was said until we reached the massive oak gates of our destination, but I didn't like the look on the Count's face.

"Follow me," he said curtly, and led the way through the gloomy portal.

CHAPTER XIV

ACROSS a wide, stone-flagged hall we went, our footsteps echoing eerily round the high walls, decorated with hunting trophies and faded banners; then along a gloomy corridor at the end of which we turned sharply into a small, plainly furnished room.

"Now," said the Count crisply. "Tell me what happened. Be as brief as you can."

"There isn't much to tell," replied Steeley wearily. "Just before we reached the frontier I was attacked by two French machines. They must have come down out of the sun, for I did not see them until the first one fired. It had not occurred to me that a military aeroplane of any nationality would fire at a civil machine without warning. This one did. The range was close, and several bullets struck us. Two hit Mr. X in the chest, and killed him, I believe, on the spot. Others put the engine out of action. I had to go down. Wilde, hard-pressed by yet another Breguet, followed me down, intending to pick me up, but his wheel fouled a concealed ditch and his machine was wrecked. The French followed us down. We carried Mr. X to the edge of a wood, where we had to leave him. We set fire to our machines, and then entered the wood, pursued by the Frenchmen. We doubled back, got into one of their machines, and flew off. Not knowing where else to go, we made for here, and should have landed at the Schloss had we not been shot down by anti-aircraft fire."

"And the papers?" said the Count tersely.

"Papers—what papers?" asked Steeley blankly.

"The papers Mr. X was carrying."

"I know nothing about any papers," lied Steeley glibly. "I don't remember you saying anything to me about any papers, and Mr. X never uttered a word from the moment I first met him until the time he was killed."

For a full minute the Count stared at us in stony silence. I could see that he was really upset, but he couldn't find a valid excuse to blame us for anything.

"You might have guessed he was carrying something," he said presently.

"The whole thing didn't occupy more than five minutes of time, and when one is under fire, one doesn't have much time to sit down and bother about details. Frankly, once I realised that Mr. X was dead, my one concern was to get away, for which you can hardly blame me, bearing in mind what you said about Devil Island."

"This puts me in a very difficult position," said the Count slowly. "You'd better wait here."

With that he went out and we didn't see him again for a long time.

About one o'clock a blackshirt came in with a not very appetising meal of bread, cheese, *Sauerkraut*, and beer on a tray, otherwise we were left to ourselves. There were plenty of things I could have talked about, but Steeley laid a finger on his lips and indicated the walls significantly. I knew he was thinking of dictaphones, or, possibly, eavesdroppers, so nothing vital was said.

It must have been nearly tea-time when the Count returned, and one glance at his face told me that things had not gone well for him. He was pale and looked furious.

"Come," he said harshly.

In one of the most uncomfortable silences I have ever experienced he preceded us back down the corridor and then through an absolute maze of passages that finally opened out into a courtyard. Without stopping, he crossed this, went through a small paddock, and at last emerged on to a large, open stretch of turf, which I guessed at once was the private aerodrome on which we should have landed. As if to confirm this, an aero engine came to life not far away and presently the Speedster appeared from a long, reed-thatched shed not far from where we stood.

"May I ask what you intend doing?" inquired Steeley.

"We are going back to the Towers," answered the Count shortly.

The Speedster taxied up to us and then stopped. I saw that Helene was in the pilot's seat.

"Are we all going in this machine?" asked Steeley.

"We are," returned the Count briskly.

There was nothing wrong with that. The Speedster could accommodate six at a pinch, in three pairs of seats set in tandem, although the rear pair were a trifle small and were more often used for luggage; but I could see that Steeley didn't like the idea of being flown by Helene. Neither did I, for that matter. Most pilots dislike being flown by someone else, particularly when the other pilot's ability is an unknown quantity.

"We've no time to lose if we're going to get back in daylight," observed Steeley, looking just a little bit worried. "Have you done any night-flying?" He addressed the question to Helene.

"Bring your nerve with you, and you'll be all right," was the rather insolent reply.

Steeley flushed. "It isn't *my* nerves, it's yours I was thinking about," he retorted coldly.

Still, we all got in, the Count sitting in front next to Helene, with Steeley and myself behind.

Helene made quite a good take off, and thereafter we settled down to one of the most remarkable flights I have ever undertaken. Not only from the flying point of view, but from the characters of the passengers. In the first place, if Steeley's deductions were correct, which, frankly, I was beginning to doubt, the pilot was a man dressed in woman's clothes. Sitting next to her was a self-confessed prince of crooks, and behind, the two men who were trying to run him down. I looked out of the window by my elbow for some time but the panorama was strange to me, and I hardly knew over what country we were flying, much less the district.

I suppose we had been flying for nearly two hours when Steeley, who had been sitting in such a position that he could look ahead through the windscreen, touched Helene lightly on the shoulder and pointed at the horizon, which I saw had become very hazy.

"There's fog ahead," he said. "If I were you I should bear a bit to the south and try to get round it."

Helene took not the slightest notice.

Steeley addressed her again, this time speaking more loudly. "That's fog ahead," he repeated. "Go on as you are, and you'll be into it inside ten minutes."

Still Helene took no notice.

Steeley appealed to the Count. "Look here, sir," he said. "I've flown in all sorts of conditions in my time, but I don't believe in taking useless risks. We're not equipped for blind flying, and if we run into that muck at this height, we shall be out of control before we can get under it and see the ground again." He pointed ahead to where the horizon was now completely blotted out.

The Count looked uncomfortable. "Don't you think you'd better do what Delaroy suggests?" he said, looking at Helene.

Helene swung the machine round so violently that for a moment I thought something had broken, and I gave expression to my thoughts in no uncertain terms.

"Oh, shut up," snapped Helene.

A wisp of grey mist flashed past the cabin windows, and knowing it was too late to do anything unless we turned back—which I should certainly have done had I been alone—I sank back into my seat and prepared for the worst. If there is one thing that gets me jittery, unless I am flying with a pilot

of unquestionable ability in a machine properly equipped for the job, it is flying in fog.

Helene cut the engine, but long before we were down we were in the thick of it. The last thousand feet were a horror, and I fully expected to hit something before we saw the ground. We couldn't have been more than a hundred feet above it when it finally came into view, and what a view it was —such as we could see of it. Visibility was limited to two hundred yards at most, and all I could see through a grey haze was a dark green forest of fir-trees.

"I'm sorry to butt in again," said Steeley presently, quite quietly to Helene; "but if you're making for England, you're off your course. You're too far to the north."

On we went without deviating a fraction, with trees, trees, nothing but trees below us.

Steeley looked at the Count helplessly. "We shall be into the mountains presently," he said.

The Count was obviously getting alarmed. "What ought we to do?" he asked.

"Start zig-zagging until we pick up the river," answered Steeley promptly. "We should find it in three or four tacks to the south."

"You'd better do that, Helene," said the Count.

Helene complied, but with bad grace.

On the third tack we hit the river—I never learned the name of it—but we overshot it and found ourselves in the soup again. Banking steeply to look for it Helene side-slipped, and nearly had us into the tree-tops. Still, she managed to keep the river in sight, and brought the Speedster round on a course to follow it.

Steeley stared down at the river, and following his eyes I saw that he was watching a piece of floating timber. "We're going the wrong way," he called sharply.

"We're not," snapped Helene.

"I say we are," grated Steeley between his teeth.

I could see that he was getting really angry, as he had every cause to be, for quite apart from Helene's execrable flying, the fog was lowering, and although we were down to fifty feet, we were skimming through patches of it. From its dark indigo tint I knew it was useless to think of trying to get through to the sunny side. All we could see below were the sombre trees, and the river, now a rushing torrent.

Steeley addressed the Count earnestly. “Look, sir,” he said, “this is getting really silly. We’re heading for the mountains. At this height and with this visibility we shall be into the first one we come to before we see it. We’ve got to turn and go the other way, but I’m afraid that if Helene tries to turn she’ll either lose the river or throw us into it; and if we lose it now we shall never find it again.”

By this time the Count was really worried, there was no doubt about that.

“Helene,” he said, “don’t you think you’d better change places with Captain Delaroy?”

For a moment or two I thought there was going to be a scene. Helene opened her side-window, which was getting rather steamy, like a saloon car on a cold night when all the windows are closed, and stared down. “I still think I’m right,” she said obstinately. “But if you think someone else can do the job better than I can, well, I suppose they’d better do it.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “Hold this,” she said, passing back her handbag, preparatory to changing places with Steeley.

I could see that this was going to be by no means easy, for there was little room to spare as it was, but with a squeeze it might just be done. In the meantime something else claimed my attention.

When Helene handed me her bag I was immediately struck by the weight of it. I have no doubt that she had carried it long enough for the weight to become familiar, but to me it was extraordinary, even allowing for all the miscellaneous equipment transported about by the average girl. I could only think of one thing to account for it, and this I was able to confirm by allowing my hands, with the bag in them, to drop below the level of the backs of the seats in front of me. One glance was enough. In the bag was an automatic pistol.

Meanwhile, Steeley had stood up as far as he was able to in order to make the change. He couldn’t stand upright, of course, the height of the cabin would not permit it, so in a bent-up position, which may be easier to imagine than describe, he started moving into the front seat which, at the same time, was being evacuated by Helene.

While he was still in what I can only call a crumpled-up position I saw to my horror that the document which he had taken from Mr. X, which had been folded into the shape of a foolscap envelope, but rather longer, was sticking out of his breast pocket, and while I was still wondering if I dare warn him, it fell out straight into the Count’s lap.

Maybe it was the blood that gave him an inkling as to what it was. Be that as it may, I saw a frown of suspicion leap into his eyes. In a twinkling of an eye he had opened it out and the game was up. His right hand flashed to his pocket. My one idea was to prevent him keeping the plans, and I could only think of one way of doing it. As quick as lightning I had whipped the open sheet out of his left hand and pushed it through the window, where, caught by the tearing slipstream, it was instantly whirled away aft.

The Count's hand came out of his pocket, gripping an automatic. He jerked it up, and for one frightful moment I thought he was going to shoot Steeley dead on the spot. In fact, I still think that was his intention, but he saw his own danger in time, for with a quick shove Steeley sent Helene flopping into the seat he had just vacated while at the same time he reached down and grabbed the joystick. He was not a moment too soon, for the machine, out of control for an instant, had side-slipped, and our wheels must have brushed the tree-tops.

Steeley settled himself in the seat, and then looked straight into the muzzle of the Count's revolver not six inches from his face. "What do you think you're going to do with that?" he said coolly. "You might as well shoot yourself as shoot me."

And he was right, there was no doubt whatever about that. With an altitude that could have been measured in inches, the joystick needed only one knock to send us all crashing to destruction. So the Count, as white as death, just glared at him, restraining his fury with an effort, clearly not knowing what to do.

While this had been going on I had not been idle. I remembered Helene's gun, even as I shoved the plans through the window. As I sank back into my seat she made a grab at the bag, but she was a fraction of a second too late. Before she could prevent it I had the gun in my hand, and reaching over pushed the muzzle against the Count's neck.

He had been far too occupied in watching Steeley to take any notice of what was going on behind him, and as the cold steel touched him the expression on his face changed from fury to chagrin. There he sat, his gun still covering Steeley, and mine covering him. The whole thing was fantastically melodramatic, almost to the point of burlesque, as Steeley was the first to realise, for he laughed softly. Then he became serious.

"Looks like stalemate," he said. "But don't let anyone act prematurely. It only needs someone to do something foolish to finish the lot of us, and that won't help anybody. Moreover, if I don't get this machine round in the next

minute or so, what will happen will be nobody's business except the undertaker's."

"Count Cortusoides," I said. "Do you mind throwing your gun out of the window?"

"I will not," he answered coldly.

"Throw it out, and then I will throw mine; then we can have a debate without fear of unseemly interruptions. There will be plenty of time for hostilities, if you want them, when we get out of the mess we are undoubtedly in."

For a moment or two the Count hesitated. Then, with a gesture of impotence, he tossed the gun out of the window through which I had thrown the plans. True to my word, mine followed, and I sank back with a sigh of relief, feeling that one danger at least had been averted. "Go ahead, Steeley," I said.

I held my breath—I think we all did—as the river disappeared in a blur of grey fog, but presently it swung into view again, and the imminent peril was over. Not that we were by any means out of the wood.

I will not dwell on the next hour. The atmosphere in the cabin was tense, but no one spoke. Steeley flew on, his eyes alternating between the instrument board and the indistinct landscape over which we were skimming. Once we nearly hit a church tower, but Steeley saw it just in time and although Helene and I were thrown into each other's arms by his desperate swerve, the machine cleared it. Shortly afterwards the fog began to lift, and, as so often happens, it ended abruptly at the coast, which we struck at a spot I knew well, just south of Calais. The Channel, without a boat in sight, lay ahead.

"Now," said Steeley wearily, for the strain of flying in conditions such as we had recently experienced had been intense, "don't you think we'd better have a heart-to-heart talk about things? Upon the result of the conference will depend whether we land at the Towers or at Croydon, where doubtless the authorities will be most interested in our story."

CHAPTER XV

"VERY well," said the Count. "Why did you lie about Mr. X?"

“You don’t suppose I’m going to deliver British military secrets to potential enemies, do you? Had you told me in the first place what sort of job you were sending me on, I should not have undertaken it, so the present position would never have arisen. Naturally, having some sense of patriotism I’m very glad this has happened.”

“You killed Mr. X, I suppose?”

“Nothing of the sort. Everything transpired exactly as I described it to you, except that when we were on the ground after Mr. X had been shot, I took the plans from his pocket. Even then I didn’t know what they were. I only discovered that when I was trying to clean them up a bit about a couple of minutes before you arrived on the scene. Realising, rather late in the day, what I held in my hands, my immediate and natural decision was to return the documents to the Air Ministry as soon as possible.”

“I went to untold trouble to get those plans.”

“I don’t doubt it, but I can’t help that. They’re out of your reach now, unless you organise a search party to go over the tree-tops in the district where we jettisoned them. The point is, what are you going to do about it? But before reaching a hasty decision, may I commend to your notice the old riddle which inquires, ‘Why do little birds in their nest agree?’ The answer being that, if they didn’t, they’d fall out. Until we get on the ground, at least, we should be well advised to agree, or we risk the same fate as the little birds. An aeroplane of this size is no place to start a rough-house.”

To this rather protracted speech the Count made no reply, but sat staring at Steeley, clearly undecided as to what to say or do. For my part, as flying over the sea in a single-engined land plane never did make any appeal to me, I hoped that the lull in the storm would last until we reached England. The French coast, half concealed by the great fog-bank, was slipping away behind us, and already the sky was beginning to turn to that soft mellow tint of greeny-blue that precedes twilight.

From the Count I turned my eyes to Steeley, and saw that he was deeply interested in something below and ahead of us. A little frown lined his forehead, and as I watched his face it grew deeper. Unable to restrain my curiosity, I craned my neck to see what it was that held his attention.

“That’s a funny-looking boat,” I observed, as my eyes fell on the only vessel in sight. I cannot recall ever seeing an aircraft carrier from the air before, which may account for my failure to recognise it as such.

“It isn’t exactly a boat. It’s a carrier,” said Steeley. “And, frankly, I don’t like the look of it,” he added.

“Why not?” exclaimed the Count sharply.

“There seemed to be a devil of a lot of activity on deck as soon as we appeared. Look! There’s a machine taking off now.”

For some seconds no one spoke. We watched the aircraft, no larger than an insect, take off. As it cleared the flying deck it turned towards us, climbing steeply.

“That’s all I wanted to know,” muttered Steeley, and in a flash he had swung the machine round and was racing back over his course.

“Here, what are you doing?” cried the Count angrily.

“I’m going back to France.”

“What on earth for?”

“Whatever else I may have thought about you, my dear Count, I’ve never for one moment doubted your perspicacity until now,” replied Steeley tersely. “It’s a thousand pounds to a broken tail-skid that that machine is after us.”

“Why should it be after us?”

“Use your imagination. Can’t you visualise what sort of hornet’s nest that affair in France this morning has upset? It wouldn’t take long to identify Mr. X, I fancy. Just think of the sequence of events that would follow that discovery, and you will see what I mean. France and England are watching the movements of aircraft pretty closely, if I know anything about it. By the way, am I right in supposing that the two machines we flew to France this morning had false registration letters?”

“Quite right.”

“This one hasn’t.”

“No.”

“Is it registered in your name?”

“Very well. What is going to happen when we land? We should, as you are doubtless aware, land at a Customs airport. Do you want to do that—with two ‘wanted’ men aboard?”

“Certainly not.”

“What then? If we land anywhere else the aircraft following us will certainly want to know why. It seems to me that our obvious course is to get back into the fog before our pursuers can get close enough to us to make out our registration letters. If they succeed in doing that you will certainly be subject to a difficult cross-examination when you get back to England, with or without us.”

The Count moved uncomfortably. “Yes, I think you’re right,” he said. “If you weren’t on board all would be well. Our papers are in order, and we

could land at any recognised airport."

"You're not going to suggest that Wilde and I make the supreme sacrifice by jumping overboard, I hope," observed Steeley grimly.

"No, I wouldn't ask you to do that."

"That's considerate of you, anyway," returned Steeley sarcastically, turning to look behind him. "If you are still in any doubt about the machines from the carrier being interested in us, take a glance——" His voice trailed away, as if the sight was more than he could bear.

The Count turned to look, but Steeley suddenly jerked the nose of the machine down and dived full out for the fog-bank into which we presently plunged.

"There were half a dozen machines on our tail at different altitudes," he explained. "But I don't think they were close enough to read our registration letters. They were at the wrong angle, anyway." He throttled back, and we began to sink down through the opaque mist.

Now I've known Steeley for a long time, and from the odd expression on his face I knew that something had happened, that he was withholding something, but what it was I could not for the life of me imagine. For a minute or two we continued to glide, the clammy moisture racing past the cabin windows, no sound except for the plaintive wail of wind in the wires; then a brownish mass came into view below, and an instant later I saw that it was the sand of the seashore. From the width of the beach I knew that we were a good deal lower down the coast than Cap Gris Nez. We were still more or less shrouded in fog, but even so, I was more than a little surprised when Steeley levelled out over the sand with the obvious intention of landing.

"What are you going to do?" asked the Count wonderingly.

"I'm going to land," replied Steeley shortly.

"Why?"

"To give those R.A.F. machines time to clear off. We can't go on flying indefinitely; there's a limit to our petrol, and the farther we go down the coast the farther we've got to come back. We could go straight across the Ditch from lower down, of course, but no one in his right mind tackles a hundred miles' sea crossing with a heavily loaded single-engined machine unless it becomes absolutely necessary."

I was still unconvinced, and as our wheels ran lightly over the firm sand I felt that Steeley had another reason for landing besides the one he had put forward.

We ran to a standstill not far from the low sand dunes that line the landward side of the beach at this point, and almost before we had stopped Steeley had opened the door and stepped out. But the Count was taking no chances. Quick as Steeley was, the Count was not far behind him. I in turn jumped down at the Count's heels, and was thus just in time to see the beginning of another minor drama that was, although I had no means of knowing it, to end in stark tragedy.

Steeley, after he jumped down, did not simply stand and wait for the rest of us, as would normally be the case, but darted towards the tail. For a moment I could not imagine what had come over him, but then, with a curious form of shock, I saw. Draped round the bracing wire that runs from the centre of the fin to the boom of the tail-plane, where presumably it had been held by the rush of air, was the document we had taken from Mr. X.

The Count saw it and recognised it at once, and made a rush at Steeley, who by this time was trying to get it into its proper folds so that he could put it into his pocket. I think he forgot the cane the Count habitually carried, and the momentary lapse nearly cost him his life, for only by leaping sideways like a cat did he evade the furious blow that the Count aimed at him with the loaded end. He succeeded in folding the map, however, and thrust it into his pocket as Helene arrived just in time to see and understand what had happened.

It was a white, bitterly hostile face that Steeley turned towards the Count. "You ever try that on me again and I'll wring your snipe's neck for you," he snarled. "Keep your distance or I'll do it now."

And there we stood, glaring at each other.

None of us saw the gendarme coming, and the first intimation we had of his presence was, when he hopped off a rather dilapidated bicycle, which he dropped unceremoniously on to the sand a few yards away, and then walked up to the party, stopping near the Count and fumbling in his pocket for his notebook. He was a cheerful-looking little man, with a round, friendly face, dark twinkling eyes, and the common heavy black moustache.

"*Bonjour, messieurs*," he said brightly, and it was clear that he meant no harm. Probably he had heard the machine coming down, and hurried to the spot to see if he could be of any assistance. He may, of course, have been on the look out for aircraft, but there was nothing in his manner to suggest that he was unduly suspicious.

Whether the Count lost his head, or whether he had already planned a triple murder, I don't know. Without the slightest warning he swung the silver-knobbed end of his cane and brought it crashing down on the back of

the gendarme's little round uniform cap. The unfortunate man went down like a dynamited chimney.

The sound of the blow made me feel sick, and horrified beyond words at the dastardly act, I could only stare down at the dreadful result of it. Quick as lightning the Count knelt beside the gendarme, and even then I had no idea what it was in his mind. It was only when he sprang to his feet, eyes blazing, with the gendarme's little automatic in his hand, that I realised our danger.

"Look out, Steeley," I yelled, and ducked. The weapon blazed the same instant, and had the Count been as proficient with firearms as he was with his cane he would have ended the story on the spot. He had fired at Steeley, but Steeley had also seen what was coming and jumped aside, with the result that the shot missed him.

Now this business, so often described in fiction and portrayed on the screen, of charging a man with a loaded gun in his hand, and disarming him, is, in fact, an almost impossible undertaking—always assuming that the man with the gun is prepared to kill. For either of us to reach the Count it would be necessary to take several paces towards him, during which time he would be able to fire at least two shots at a range at which it would be almost impossible to miss. All this was perfectly clear to me, and I did not stop to put the matter to test. Steeley evidently thought as I did, for he did not wait, either. Uncourageous though it may seem, we both bolted, and putting the machine between us and the Count fled incontinently towards the dunes, followed by whistling bullets.

From the comparative safety of the sandhills we watched Helene and the Count scramble hurriedly back into the machine. Their intention was plain, and we could do nothing to prevent its execution. Within a minute the cabin door had slammed, the machine had raced down the deserted beach and disappeared into the mist, leaving only the poor crumpled figure of the fallen gendarme to mark the place where it had been.

Before we could reach the scene of the cold-blooded crime it had reappeared, however, low down, racing back towards us; both Steeley and I ducked as something hurtled out of the cabin window, but then the machine swept on and we saw the missile firmly embedded in the sand. It was the gendarme's automatic, presumably empty.

I was going to pick it up but Steeley jerked me back. "Don't touch it," he snapped, turning to the unlucky victim of the Count's ferocity. "Stone dead," he said softly, looking down at the waxen, blood-splashed face. "My God!

What a swine——” He broke off, and we both sprang round as there came a sound of voices from the dunes.

With my heart in my mouth, as the saying is, I saw several people—trippers, by the look of them—hurry towards us. We waited for no more. Side by side we set off up the beach as fast as our legs would carry us.

CHAPTER XVI

“WHAT are we going to do?” I gasped, as we tore along.

“Keep going.”

“I can’t stand this pace for long,” I panted, and presently, pursuit or no pursuit, I slowed down to a sharp walk. I was absolutely blown, and when one reaches this condition, one is near the end of one’s endurance. All was quiet behind us, but I did not need to be told that a hot hue and cry would be started as soon as the police had been notified of the crime.

“One way and another we seem to be just about as far in the soup as we can get,” I observed bitterly.

“I can’t dispute that,” answered Steeley. “I couldn’t foresee that that wretched gendarme would arrive on the scene at such an ill-chosen moment—ill-chosen from my point of view and very ill-chosen from his, as things have turned out.”

“You knew those plans were stuck on the tail-plane?”

“Of course. I spotted them when I was looking back at the machines coming up after us from the carrier. It seemed a fairly simple matter to retrieve them. In any case, we had to double back because of the R.A.F. machines.”

“Having made England and France equally hot for us, perhaps you’ll tell me where you propose to hide?”

“Hide? It isn’t much use hiding—I mean, we can’t go on hiding indefinitely.”

“Where are you going, then?”

“To the Towers—I hope.”

“Why not drown ourselves right away, and save the Count the trouble of bumping us off?” I suggested.

“It’s not much use going anywhere else,” returned Steeley. “The position, boiled down, comes to this. We’ve got to put a rope round the Count’s neck before we have one put round ours.”

“In that case, we’ve no time to waste.”

“We’re not wasting any, are we?”

“Where are you making for now?”

“Berck.”

“Berck! The aerodrome?”

“That’s it. We’ve got to get across the Ditch, and our only chance is to fly across. The ordinary public services, both in and out of France and England, are, I imagine, being watched rather more closely than a mouse-hole in a cat’s home.”

“That means that we’re not going by a public service?”

“Quite right.”

“What other sort of service is there?”

“None. We’ve got to make one.”

“How?”

“By borrowing an aircraft.”

“How long do you suppose it is going to be possible to stalk about Europe borrowing other people’s aeroplanes?” I enquired sarcastically.

“Oh, quite a long time yet,” replied Steeley blandly. “You see, if a man sees another fellow casting covetous eyes on his motor-car, he might wonder what his intentions are; but if a pilot sees a stranger walking admiringly round his aeroplane, the very last thing he supposes is that he is contemplating pushing off with it, the reason being because it does not occur to him that the other fellow may know how to handle it. And in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he’s right. Later on, when the aircraft industry is like the motor-car business, and everyone can fly, it won’t do to leave aeroplanes standing about anyhow and anywhere as they are left now. I can’t imagine anything easier than stealing an aeroplane. Without bragging, I should account myself a poor fish if I couldn’t get away with one any day of the week. We might bear it in mind as a little sideline if ever we get really hard up. There are plenty of customers about the world waiting for a cheap aeroplane.”

“Well, as I expect by now we are wanted for murder, aeroplane stealing will be a comparatively tame pursuit,” I sneered. “How far do you reckon we are from Berck?”

“Four or five miles.”

After that nothing was said for some time. We went on as fast as we could, keeping to the beach, sometimes walking and sometimes breaking into a trot. Once or twice we heard traffic on our left, from which we gathered that a road ran along the sea-front just behind the dunes. It was a miserable evening, with every promise of rain, so it was not surprising that we met no one.

"Suppose there isn't a machine at Berck?" I questioned, after a long silence. The inquiry was prompted by the fact that Berck isn't an ordinary airport; it is really only an emergency aerodrome, although it is used by a large number of machines.

"We will deal with that unfortunate contingency if and when it arises," returned Steeley calmly.

As a matter of fact, there were three machines on the aerodrome when we reached it, and a more miserable, deserted-looking place I never saw. The first was a Puss Moth, stuck up on its nose at the edge of the aerodrome, where someone had obviously overshot in a bad landing. That was no use to us. The second was a French Golden Ray standing near the control officer's hut; one of its engines had been taken down, and the machine looked as if it had been standing there for a month. That was no use to us, either. The third, and last, was a smart blue-and-white twin-engined Monospar standing by the petrol pump. There was, or had been, something wrong with it, for although the propellers were idling, a mechanic was in the cockpit and another stood near the nose in conversation with a hatless gentleman in evening dress.

"That looks like our conveyance," said Steeley calmly, eyeing the Monospar.

I halted, aghast. "You can't get away with that," I protested.

"Why not?"

"What are you going to do—brain the owner and the two mechanics?"

Steeley shook his head. "Everything can be done by kindness," he murmured. "Come on, let's go and have a word with the lad in the glad-rags."

With a sinking feeling in the stomach that I always get on such occasions, I followed him as, with his hands in his pockets, he strolled towards the machine as if he wanted to have a nearer view of it. There was no one on the road; everything seemed quite normal in fact, from which I could only assume that the alarm which by this time was surely making the telephone wires hum had not yet reached the aerodrome.

We were half-way between the buildings and the machine when the mechanic who was standing by the nose saw us coming. He pointed towards the road, and at the same time shouted something about 'Forbidden to pass.' It was hard to hear just what he said on account of the noise of the engine. Steeley took not the slightest notice, whereupon the mechanic started walking towards us, but before he could reach us a telephone started ringing shrilly in the control hut. Shouting at us something about what he would do when he came back, he altered his course for the hut, while we joined the lad in evening dress who I knew instantly from the cut of his clothes was English.

"Nice aeroplane," observed Steeley.

To me it sounded absolutely fatuous, but Steeley was a better judge of human nature than I was. I suppose he gambled on the inherent vanity of all human beings who own something, no matter what it is—motor-car, horse, or merely a dog; admiration of one's property is at once a tacit admission of one's own good taste, in the same way as depreciation is usually taken as a personal affront. Anyway, in this case it seemed to work, for the fellow smiled good-naturedly.

"I've never been so close to an aeroplane before," continued Steeley pleasantly. "May I have a look inside?"

Maybe the fact that we were English—comrades in a foreign land sort of thing—had something to do with it, for the private owner, far from making any demur, seemed only too pleased to oblige.

"Rather," he said cheerfully. "I'll show you. I've just been changing a plug." With that he got up into the cockpit, the mechanic getting out to make room for us.

This, I think, was rather more than Steeley bargained for, but he couldn't very well protest against the fellow getting into his own machine, so up we all went, and our new friend began to explain the functions of the various dials and gauges. He was still talking when out of the corner of my eye I saw the mechanic come out of the control hut, and there was something in the way in which he ran towards the machine that gave me a nasty turn. I nudged Steeley, who grasped the situation immediately. The alarm had been given, and if we were to purloin the machine we had just about thirty seconds to do it in. Steeley did it in ten. With a hearty shove he pushed the astonished owner over backwards, so that he fell into the rear seat with his arms waving and his legs in the air. "Hold him, Tubby," he snapped.

As I threw myself on the struggling man, I heard the cockpit cowling shut with a bang; the engine roared; there was a startled shout outside as we

moved forward, and then I went over myself as a wheel brake swung the machine round in its own length. The furious owner tore himself from my grip and darted at Steeley, but he was too late; the throttle was wide open, and the Monospar was tearing over the ground at ever-increasing speed. Even so, his rage was such that he started beating Steeley on the head with his fist until Steeley's shrill yell of warning made him desist.

"You'll kill the lot of us if you go on like that, you fool," he snarled.

"What the hell's the meaning of this?" roared our irate passenger.

"Come and sit down here and I'll tell you," invited Steeley, indicating the seat at his side.

I've never seen anything so comical as the impotent anger of our victim. First he looked at the ground, now a trough of indigo shadows dropping away behind us, as though weighing up the chances of getting the machine down again by force; then he looked at Steeley, and if looks could kill Steeley would have been stricken dead on the spot.

"By God! I'll make you pay for this," breathed our well-dressed acquaintance heavily.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable; I've got something to tell you," said Steeley imperturbably. "Think, man; do you suppose I'm doing this without a damned good reason?"

"It'll have to be a good 'un, too," retorted the other, with justifiable vindictiveness.

"The sooner you calm yourself the sooner we shall see eye to eye with each other," returned Steeley. "Sit down." There was something in his manner that made the other comply. In any case, he was helpless to do anything.

"I shall be a long time seeing eye to eye with you," he muttered bitterly.

"Right-o. Then let's start with this," suggested Steeley. "If you'll feel in my breast pocket you'll find, amongst other things, a notecase. In it there is, or should be, something over two hundred pounds in sterling and about ten thousand francs. You can put that in your pocket as a guarantee of our *bona fides*."

"*Bona fides*, my eye. What does that prove, anyway?"

"That we're capable of paying our fare home, either by the regular service or by chartering an aeroplane, had we been allowed that privilege," answered Steeley.

The owner of the machine made no move to confirm his statement, but he looked a little bit impressed. "Go on," he said, as Steeley turned to left

and headed out over the Channel. “You’re taking yourselves home, eh?”

“That’s it.”

“What about me?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us.”

“I was on my way to Le Touquet.”

“Too bad.”

“There’s a girl waiting dinner there for me.”

“If she loves you—as I feel certain she must—she won’t mind making it breakfast.”

The other didn’t look so sure. “I’m still waiting for you to tell me the meaning of all this,” he said shortly.

“All right. In the first place, my name is Delaroy, and the lad sitting behind you is Tubby Wilde. We’re in the Intelligence Service.”

The other laughed, but there was little humour in it. “That’s a damn good start,” he sneered. “My name, which you’ll have good cause to know before I’ve finished with you, is Kinghurst—Squadron Leader, Royal Air Force.”

Steeley shook his head sadly. “Why didn’t you say that before?” he said complainingly. “It would have saved a lot of words. You’re not stationed at Farnborough, by any chance, are you?”

“No, Upavon.”

“That’s not far away. Have you heard about the night watchman being murdered at the Experimental Establishment?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know why it was done?”

Kinghurst did not answer.

“I mean, you know about the G.A. drawings of the new Hemsworth job being stolen?”

“Yes. Most people in the Service know, I expect, but I was not aware that the facts had been made public.”

“They haven’t. I told you we were in the Secret Service. It pleases me to think we shall be able to do you a good turn for so obligingly lending us your machine.”

“Yes—and how?”

“By getting you accelerated promotion.”

“How very nice of you. What are you going to do—ring up the Air Council and——”

“Now don’t get facetious. Those G.A. drawings we spoke about just now.”

“Well?”

“They’re in my pocket. I was taking them back; that’s why I was in a hurry.”

Kinghurst stared. “Are you pulling my leg?” he asked incredulously.

Steeley put his left hand into his pocket, took out the drawings and passed them over. “There you are,” he said lightly. “Take a look. You should know as much about that sort of thing as anybody, so there would be no point in my trying to deceive you.”

Kinghurst opened one side of the sheet, and then turned a startled face to Steeley. “What are you going to do with them?” he asked.

“Hand them over to you with a request that you’ll take them to the Air Ministry as quickly as possible.”

“Why don’t you take them?”

“Because we’re on the track of the crooks who stole them.”

“Good God! This is the sort of thing you read about in books.”

“Yes, and it’s much nicer to read about in books than get mixed up with,” I put in from the back.

“But can’t we all go the Air Ministry, and then go on with the tracking down business?” suggested Kinghurst, eagerly.

Steeley turned a reproachful eye on him. “What about the girl?”

“My goodness, I’d forgotten all about her,” confessed Kinghurst. “But why on earth didn’t you tell me about this at the aerodrome, instead of knocking me over and pushing off with my machine in the way you did? I’d have lent it to you like a shot.”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t,” Steeley told him firmly. “You’d have been hard to convince, and I don’t blame you. It would have sounded a pretty wild story, anyway. You heard the telephone ring and saw the mechanic run into the control hut?”

“Yes.”

“You saw him come out again in a hurry?”

“Yes.”

“He was after our blood. The fellow who stole the plans murdered a gendarme not an hour ago on the beach close to Berck, and put us in rather a tight corner.”

“God spare my days!” cried Kinghurst aghast. “I didn’t know these things really happened.”

“Well, you know now,” Steeley told him, smiling. Then he became serious. “This isn’t a laughing matter, Kinghurst,” he said earnestly. “You get those plans to the Air Ministry as soon as you can, regardless of anything or anybody.”

“Who would be likely to stop me?”

“Somebody might. The murder of the gendarme and the affair of the aeroplane making a bolt from Berck will be known in England by this time, and the police will be on the lookout for it. But whatever happens you get along to the Ministry.”

“What about you?”

“We’ll drop ourselves as soon as we get over the other side.”

“Where?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Shoreham or somewhere.”

“But won’t you be asked questions?”

“We should if we tried to pass the barrier in the ordinary way, but I’ve no intention of doing that. I shall land at the darkest end of the aerodrome, where we shall be able to get out, I hope, without being seen. You can report in the usual way, but if I were you I should take straight off again and go up to Croydon or Gatwick, and there park your machine while you go along to the Air Ministry. With a bit of luck you might still be in Le Touquet before morning.”

“Not likely. There’ll be too many questions to be answered. I’m supposed to be on leave.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to work that out for yourself,” Steeley told him sympathetically. “Believe me, I’m more than grateful for the use of your machine. I sincerely hope that things pan out all right, and that the lady won’t be too hard on you for letting her down.”

The lights of the English coast were now quite close, so Steeley turned left in the direction of Brighton for Shoreham Airport, and a few minutes later we were circling over it. The lights were turned on and down we went. Our run, well judged by Steeley, carried us far away to the other side of the aerodrome, and as soon as the machine had stopped we prepared to get out.

I was down first. For a few seconds Steeley remained, talking to our benefactor, then he jumped down beside me. With a parting wave to the now cheerful officer we ran off into the dark area not touched by the floodlights,

while the Monospar swung round and taxied tail-up towards the control building.

"Well, that was all very simple," observed Steeley, as we climbed over the boundary fence on to the road.

I agreed, but I was far from comfortable in my mind. Also, I was very hungry, and I told Steeley so.

"Yes, I think we'd better refuel ourselves before we do anything else," he agreed.

Ten minutes later we were in a fish and chip restaurant in Shoreham, eating our dinners like law-abiding citizens.

CHAPTER XVII

I MUST say that by the time we had finished I felt a good deal more like facing the world again. Steeley, who, as always, seemed tireless, left me drinking a third cup of coffee while he went out with the avowed intention of doing some shopping. He didn't tell me what he proposed to purchase, nor did I trouble to inquire, being quite satisfied with things as they were for a little while. He was gone about half an hour, then he rejoined me.

"Are you nearly ready?" he asked quickly.

"Is there any hurry?"

"There might be; I saw a constable take a second look at me just now," was his rather alarming answer. It was sufficient incentive to bring me to my feet, and after paying the bill I followed him out on to the pavement.

"Which way?" I asked.

"This," he answered, pointing to a rather dilapidated Morris Cowley of 1923 or 1924 vintage which stood against the kerb.

"What's this?" I inquired.

"Motor-car."

"Where did you get it?"

"Bought it."

"What for?"

"To take us to the Towers."

"Well, I suppose you know what you're doing," I observed helplessly.

Nothing more was said until we were well on our way. “Do you mean that you’re going right up to the front door and ring the bell?” I asked.

“No, I don’t think so. Not at present, anyway,” was the reply. “This is how the thing looks to me. Wayne and his sleuths are after us, and at present we can’t afford to be caught. The Count was right when he said that the last place where he would look for us was at the house of the man who had laid information against us. That’s one reason why I’ve decided to go there.”

“What are the others?”

“There’s only one, but it’s a good one. If we’ve got to wind up this affair satisfactorily—and so far as I can see we’ve got to do that to clear ourselves—it isn’t much use continuing our investigations anywhere else. We might go down to the villa at Juan les Pins, it’s true, or the Club which the Count runs in the West End, but I don’t think we should find anything at either place. When I have got a nut to crack, I believe in going straight to the kernel. In this case the meat in the coco-nut will be found at Gartholme Towers. I don’t necessarily mean in the building itself; there’s the aerodrome, for instance, and we might have another look at the cowshed. I am by no means convinced that we saw all there was to be seen the last time we were there.”

“Which are you going to tackle first?”

“I hadn’t made up my mind when we started, but I’ve been thinking things over, and I’ve got an increasing hunch that the cowshed is the place to start. I can’t help feeling that it plays an important part in the Count’s organisation. Aeroplanes land in the adjacent field. Why? Why don’t they go straight to the Count’s private aerodrome? I could make a guess, but guesswork is no use; we’ve got to find out. It’s a fine night, and we might be lucky enough to catch a machine coming in.”

“The Count hasn’t many machines left.”

“He’s got the Speedster, and the Hawk, which Helene must have flown up from Cannes.”

“The upset the Count has just had with us might cause a temporary lull in his activities.”

“It might, but I am more inclined to the view that it will have the opposite effect. He’s bound to be a bit worried after what has happened, and I can’t imagine him just sitting still and doing nothing.”

“Suppose there is nothing doing at the cowshed?”

“We’ll stay there until there is, or hang about in the vicinity. We’ve got to stay somewhere, and if you can think of a safer place, I’d be glad to hear of it.”

“But what are we going to do for food?”

“I’ve a couple of army blankets, a ham, some bread, and some tinned stuff in the dicky.”

“You’re going to camp out?”

“That’s my idea. We’ve slept rough before, so it shouldn’t hurt us to do it again.”

“Wanderers of the wild-wood sort of thing.”

“Not exactly. I’m hoping to find a roof in that old castle place—you remember the ruins?”

“Hell’s bells! You’re not thinking of living in that spooky-looking relic?” I protested.

“Why not? It commands a view through the trees of the cowshed, so we shall be able to see what is going on besides being comparatively safe from Wayne. What more could we ask?”

After that I gave it up. I could see that he had made up his mind, so it was no use arguing, but to me the whole business was becoming rapidly fantastic.

“What are you going to do with the car?” I asked, as we approached Dimcote village.

“Shove it in the garage and leave it there. We’ll walk the rest of the way.”

Which we did, carrying our blankets and commissariat with us, going straight down the road past the Towers gates. We had a good look at the house in passing, but it told us nothing. There was a light here and there, but the Alsatians were loose, so there was no question of making a closer inspection. Fortunately, there was a big improvement in the weather, the early rain having given way to a clear, starlit sky, so things were not so bad as they might have been. We came to the wood through which we had reached the ruins of the Priory on the occasion of our first visit, and with no more trouble than we had experienced then, in due course we stood at the edge of the moat.

“Let’s have a prowl round inside for a start,” said Steeley softly. “If we can find a place to park our kit, we’ll go down and have a scout round the cowshed. Come on.”

I followed him to the narrow causeway that gave access to the ruins, and feeling that I had gone suddenly back to the Middle Ages, presently stood in what must once have been the main hall, or nave of the building, although it was in such hopeless disorder that it was hard to see where things began and

where they ended. All around us the toppling stone walls, completely enveloped in most places with great masses of ivy which probably supported them, rose up to the starry sky, against which they terminated in terrifying silhouettes. It was very still, with no sound except the soft scrape of our shoes on the stone floor, or the piles of masonry that had fallen on it, and the occasional rustle of a bird in the ivy.

"This isn't my idea of a comfortable billet," I murmured.

"It's pretty grim, I must say," admitted Steeley. "No matter; what's this over here?" He led the way to a corner, where rose a substantial mass of stonework, and from the base of which a narrow winding stair led upward.

It would be hopeless to attempt to describe in detail or in technical terms the mouldering remains of what had once been a noble building. Broadly speaking the thing was a ruin in the fullest sense of the word, although in places part of the second story remained, and it was possible, by risking a nasty fall, to reach it. It was under such a place that we made camp, in what I suppose had once been a monk's cell. Anyway, there was a fairly clear space on one side and a ceiling of sorts over our head, and as the aspect commanded a view of the cowshed, broken, of course, by trees, it suited our purpose passably well. Here, then, we dumped our kit, and I waited for Steeley to make the next suggestion; which, after regarding the trees for a minute or two in silence, he did.

"There doesn't seem to be much doing at the moment, does there?" he observed in a disappointed tone. "Never mind; let's go and have a look round."

We recrossed the bridge, and were making our way cautiously through the trees when the cowshed door opened and a man appeared. It was too dark for us to make out his features, but judging by the way he moved, he was the same fellow who had directed us to the footpath which led to the Towers a day or two previously. For a little while he stood, doing nothing apparently but stare into the darkness, and then he disappeared inside the shed again. The air was very still, and we could hear his movements distinctly. It was also possible to hear the cows moving about in their stalls, eating or chewing the cud and occasionally coughing.

Steeley put his hand on my arm and led me back to the ruins.

"It's too quiet for us to hope to get into the shed without being heard," he breathed. "That fellow's on the lookout; the snap of a twig would give us away. Let's get back to where we left our kit. We can't keep watch day and night, so we might as well take it in turns to get some sleep."

“I should feel happier if I’d got a gun,” I declared, as we crept back to our blankets.

“I should, too, if it comes to that,” admitted Steeley, as we sat down on a pile of fallen stonework. “By the way,” he continued, “have you noticed anything unusual about that cowshed?”

“Unusual? No, there’s nothing unusual about it that I can see.”

“There are cows in it.”

“You’d almost expect a cowshed to have cows in it, wouldn’t you?”

“No, not at this time of the year. From April or May until about October cows stay out in the fields all night as well as all day; they only come into the sheds for the short time they are being milked. At least, that was the way of it when I was a lad. Apparently these cows never do go out.”

“By James! I believe you’re right.”

“I think so. If that shed was a genuine concern, it would now be empty.”

“Even so, that doesn’t help us much.”

“No, but it rather goes to prove what we suspect, that the cows are a blind to cover the real purpose of the shed—ssh!”

We both sat perfectly still through one of the most uncanny experiences I have ever encountered. Footsteps, light, slow, halting footsteps, were coming towards us. They passed us so closely that I half cowered in alarm, feeling that whoever was making the sound could not be more than a yard or two from us. But without a sign of a living soul the footsteps went right on, straight towards the moat, and finally died away.

“Did you see anything?” I asked in a whisper, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

“No, did you?”

“Not a damn thing, but I felt in my bones that this infernal place was haunted—hark! They’re coming back.”

With every nerve tense, I remained quite still while the footsteps approached us again. Then, suddenly, they stopped, and I distinctly heard a noise that was something between a gasp and a sob. A piece of masonry rattled down.

I sprang to my feet, staring to right and left.

Steeley sprang up, too. “God! What is it?” he breathed.

“Here, let’s get out of this,” I said in a strained voice, and I meant it, for I had turned stone cold. Spooks are fine things to sit in an arm-chair and read about, but they are not so welcome at midnight in a mediæval ruin.

“Shut up! Keep quiet a minute,” hissed Steeley.

There was a rustle of the ivy near at hand, and starting round, I felt my scalp tingle. Not ten yards away from us stood a white, ghostly form.

For the next few seconds I don’t think I breathed, but could only stare at the apparition in a kind of fascinated horror, while all the time the words ‘it’s a ghost . . . it’s a ghost’ seemed to run through my head like a sort of endless chain.

When Steeley spoke, I nearly jumped out of my skin, as the saying goes.

“Helene,” he said softly.

With a gasp of terror the figure started violently, and made as if to run, but at Steeley’s next words it swung round facing us.

“Helene,” he said, “where is Brian?”

The name did it. But Helene? Why did he call her Helene? As she stumbled towards us, I recognised her as the girl whom the Count had told us, after the scene in the Towers when she had interrupted us, was his deranged niece.

“Are you Steeley?” she said in a pathetic whisper.

“Yes, I’m Steeley, and this is Tubby Wilde. We’re friends. Come here, but don’t make a noise.” Steeley went to meet her, and taking her hand, brought her to our bivouac. “Now, now, that’s all right,” he said as she began to cry, and I could see that the girl was overwrought. He picked up a blanket and wrapped it round her, for she was dressed only in her nightdress, as she had been when we last saw her. Then he made a seat of sorts for her with the other blanket and squatted down beside her. “You’re the very person I want to see.” He smiled reassuringly. “You’ve seen something of Brian, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“He told you about us perhaps?”

“Yes, he told me.”

“Do you know where Brian is now?” was Steeley’s next question.

“Yes, he is in the house,” she said breathlessly.

“A prisoner?”

“Yes, I think it must be so.”

Steeley glanced at me. “All right; don’t worry about that,” he said. “We’ll soon have him out of it. I want you to take it quietly and tell us all you know about what’s happened to Brian, and about what has been going on at the Towers. Speak quietly, for there may be enemies not far away. First of all, when did you last see Brian?”

CHAPTER XVIII

"He should be here with me, but he has not come," she whispered through trembling lips. "Together we run away, but he go back. He say, you must go on alone; presently I will come. I wait. He does not come. I go back, the door is shut."

"What door?"

"The cave. The *passage souterrain*."

"You mean, there is a passage under the ground from the house to here?" I said, suddenly understanding.

"Yes, yes. A passage here." She pointed to the ground.

"We'd better begin at the beginning instead of jumping about in the middle of things," muttered Steeley to me. And then, turning to Helene, "Tell me; you're Helene, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Helene."

"The Count is your father?"

"My father, no; my cousin, yes."

"Who is the other Helene?"

"He is the son of my cousin, of the Count Cortusoides!"

"I see," said Steeley slowly. "I had an idea that was the way of it, or something of the sort."

"*Alors*, it is thus," went on Helene quickly. "My father and my mother are killed in a revolution when I was at school in Paris. My cousin comes to me. My father is rich, but my cousin he has the money. Once I run away to see—how you say?—*avocat*?"

"Lawyer."

"Yes, yes, lawyer. But the Count catch me, and I am shut up. I have been prisoner always since. But everyone say, where is Helene? So Constantino, his son, who is much like me, wears women's clothes and say he is Helene. Everyone thinks he is me. You understand?"

"Yes, I rather suspected that it was something like that. But tell me about what happened to-night, M'amoiselle; the other things can wait."

"*Oui, M'sieur.* But first, one day Brian comes to my room. He climbs on the roof. He speaks with me for a long time. We escape, but we are caught, and I see him no more until he comes again to-night. But Anna is there. You understand, Anna, who always watches me? We fight when Brian comes in. He is a man mad, because they have told him that you have had the—how you say?—the bump off. He is *très agité, très furieux*. We will go, he says,

but I tell him of the dogs, many dogs, in the garden. I say we will go by the *passage souterrain*, which begins in the cupboard. Presently, we go. Then Brian he must go back. I think he goes for things in my cousin's room. He say go on, and always he speaks of one whose name is Wayne. He does not come back, so I think I must find this Wayne, who perhaps is of the *agents*, of the police. But when I get to this end of the *passage* Alfonse is here, on guard. I know he is quick to shoot, so I go back. I cannot pass. I go back to meet Brian, but he comes not, and the door is shut. So I am alone in the *passage*. I find a place where much stones and earths have fallen. There is another *passage*, and I find myself here."

"Is the Count in the house now?" asked Steeley quickly.

"I do not know. Perhaps he has returned. I think he has gone with Constantino to the place they call the Club."

"You mean in London?"

"Yes, where they sell many things that is not allowed."

I felt Steeley start. "My God!" he whispered. "Of course." He turned to me. "You see the idea? They land the stuff here. The Club is the distributing centre." He turned again to Helene. "Are there others in the house?" he asked.

"But yes. There is Paul, and Edmund, and the Americano. And in the *passage* there is Alfonse. He is at the *terminus*."

"I expect that was Alfonse we saw just now," said Steeley to me. "Evidently the underground passage ends in the cowshed. I begin to get the hang of this establishment, but I still don't see why they need land the stuff here and cart it along the passage—unless——"

"Hadn't we better do something about Brian?" I suggested anxiously.

"Yes, we shall have to do that; but it's damned hard to know where to begin," muttered Steeley. "Quite apart from being unarmed, what are we going to do with Helene? She can't wander about the countryside dressed as she is now."

"Can't we get in touch with Wayne? I think the time is about ripe to tell him all we know, whether we've got sufficient evidence to hang the Count or not. Seriously, I don't think we can go on like this much longer."

"Yes, I think you're right," muttered Steeley, and I could see that he was torn by indecision. "It's Brian that worries me. What is going to happen to him while we're getting Wayne and bringing him back here? If the Count comes back and finds Helene gone, he's liable to do anything. Even so, I don't think we can do much without Wayne; there's certain to be a rough-

house before the night's over. Tubby, I think you'd better go to Sparling while I stay here."

"Sparling, why Sparling?"

"Because I think you may find Wayne there. If not, you'll have to ring him up."

"But why should he be at Sparling?"

"Because I told Kinghurst, just as he was taking off, that as soon as he had delivered the plans to the Air Ministry he would oblige me by getting in touch with Wayne, on the phone if he couldn't get to him himself, telling him that he had seen us, and that it might be worth his while to go to Sparling and wait there until I got in touch with him."

"But he wouldn't find Wayne at the Yard; he'd have gone home by the time he got there."

"I realised that, and told Kinghurst that if he couldn't get him at the Yard he'd better try to get him at home."

"Suppose I go; what are you going to do?"

"I'll try to make contact with Brian."

"Don't be a fool," I protested emphatically; "you can't tackle the whole gang single-handed."

"I might try."

"Not likely! You promise to wait here until I come back or I won't go; it shouldn't take me more than two hours, providing I can get the garage man to come down and let me have the car."

Steeley thought for a moment. "It is awkward, isn't it?" he muttered. "Every hour's delay increases the chances of something tragic happening to Brian. Still, I can see your point; I'd better wait here until you get back."

"Good enough," I agreed. "I'll get Helene over to Sparling, anyway, and I'll bring Wayne back with me if he's there, that is, if he doesn't clap me in jail. You keep an eye on things here."

I spoke confidently, but inwardly I was assailed by a dozen misgivings. Still, I could think of no alternative to Steeley's plan. Obviously, we couldn't leave Helene alone, and equally obviously we couldn't take her with us on a sortie which might easily end in an assault on the house. The information she had given us was invaluable, in that it was something we could never have ascertained by ourselves, but now she was only in the way. Should I be able to get the car? Would Wayne come back with me? What would happen to Brian in the meantime? These were only a few of the doubts that ran through my head as I fixed one of the blankets as comfortably as possible

round Helene's shoulders, and using a piece of string from one of our parcels to keep it in place, draped the other one round her like a skirt. Quite apart from the fact that the night air was by no means warm, I felt that a young lady in a nightdress was likely to attract attention should we meet anyone on the road.

Finally, we were ready to start, and with a last admonition to Steeley to do nothing until I returned, Helene and I set off through the trees towards the road, which we reached without any trouble. It took us some time to get to Dimcote, because I thought it wise to keep clear of the Towers, so a detour became necessary, and in the darkness we could only make slow progress while we were off the road. However, we saw no one, and in due course reached the garage, where, after making enough noise to awaken the dead in the nearby churchyard, I succeeded in getting the proprietor to come down and unlock the door of the shed wherein our car had been housed; which he did with very bad grace, excusable in the circumstances. He brightened up a bit as he took the tip I offered him, but I saw him looking at Helene in a curious way more than once, and it was perhaps as well that neither of us knew what he was thinking.

With the wheel in my hands I felt that my task was half done, and giving Helene what I hoped was a reassuring smile, I started off down the road that led to Sparling. In the open car the midnight air was bitterly cold, and I realised that the girl beside me would feel it a good deal more than I should.

"I'd sit on the floor if I were you," I told her. "You'll be out of the draught there."

She followed my advice, and with the brown blanket held closely around her face, squatted down below the level of the windscreen.

Hardly had she done so when, rounding a corner, we met another car coming in the opposite direction. The road was very narrow, and almost blinded by the oncoming headlights I slowed down, and finally stopped altogether to let it go past rather than risk getting a wheel in the ditch. The other car slowed down also, as it was bound to, and although I was a trifle surprised when it stopped, no thought of danger was in my mind. I leaned over the side.

"It's all right," I called. "There's plenty of room for you to get past."

The car did not move, and my surprise was intensified when a door on either side swung open and two men stepped out. I could not see them clearly, because I was still dazzled by the lights, but could just make out their silhouettes as they came towards me. But at the first words uttered by

one of them my heart went down like an express lift, for there was no mistaking the voice.

"Good gracious, Wilde," it said. "What on earth are you doing touring round the countryside in a motor-car at this hour of the night?" It was the Count who spoke.

Fortunately I didn't lose my head, and my first thought was for Helene. She hadn't moved from her position on the floor, and it struck me instantly that if I could get out there was just a chance that they would not find her, whatever happened to me. It seemed to be the only hope, and I acted promptly. Pushing open the door I stepped down into the road.

"Lie flat and lie still," I breathed, as I turned and closed the door behind me. Then, in a normal voice, "Hello," I said. "Fancy meeting you. Have you seen anything of Delaroy?"

I think the question rather took the wind out of the Count's sails.

"No," he said. "We haven't seen him; we should very much like to."

"He asked me to pick him up at Dimcote, but as he hasn't turned up yet, I was cruising along hoping to meet him," I explained.

"You can tell us all about it when we get back to the Towers," said the Count suavely.

Two more men had got out of the car, a big saloon, and worked their way behind me. Something hard was pressed into the small of my back, and I knew that resistance would be worse than useless.

"What about my car?" I said. "I can follow you in it, if you like."

One of the men laughed quietly—a most unpleasant sound.

"No, we'll all go together," said the Count smoothly. "The car can remain where it is for the present. I may send someone for it when we get to the Towers. In any case its loss, I am sure, would not cause you any great grief."

I got into the back seat and the two men got in on either side of me. The doors slammed, and the car slid smoothly forward down the road.

CHAPTER XIX

NOTHING more was said until we were in the Towers, in the same room as before, but there was a cold hostility about the Count's manner that I did not

like at all; not that I expected it to be otherwise. The others all followed us in, so that the five of us were together. Now that we were in the light I could see the faces of the two men who had been in the car, but they were completely strange to me, and beyond the fact that they were obviously foreigners, and that they disliked me intensely, I knew nothing about them. Nor did the Count trouble about introductions.

"Well?" he said, eyeing me grimly, after his masquerading son had run his hands over my pockets.

"What do you expect me to say to that?" I answered curtly.

"How did you get over from France?"

"Flew," I replied briefly.

"What in?"

"A machine we borrowed at Berck."

"Where is Delaroy?"

"I wish I knew," I lied glibly.

"What were you doing in that car?"

"Looking for him."

"You expected to find him at Dimcote?"

"Yes, I told you so."

"Where were you making for?"

"Here, of course. It never occurred to us to go anywhere else."

"Has Delaroy still got those plans on him?" asked the Count coldly.

"I shouldn't think so," I answered easily. "He left me with the object of returning them. I was to get a car and meet him at Dimcote. Now you know as much as I do."

The Count turned to one of the strangers. "Lucien," he said, "I think you'd better go back to the village and see if you can see anything of him. Take someone with you. If you find him, bring him along. You'd better bring that car back with you, too, in case the police start asking questions about it."

"You've got a nerve, coming back here after what's happened," observed the Count, looking at me with a puzzled expression on his face.

"It would have needed more nerve to go anywhere else," I told him morosely. "You haven't overlooked the fact that we're on the run?"

I knew quite well what the Count was thinking. He was puzzled about what was, I realised perfectly, the weakest part of my story—why Steeley and I had parted company. My wit would have to be alert when he started

pumping me on that point, as he was bound to, but fortunately the ordeal was postponed by a timely interruption. The man he had called Lucien hurried back into the room, something between fear and consternation on his sallow face.

"The girl has gone," he said.

"What!" The Count sprang round as if he had been shot. Then he faced me with an evil glint in his eye. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Be reasonable. How could I?" I bluffed.

"How did you learn of this?" rapped out the Count, facing Lucien again.

"I've just seen Anna," was the reply. "She's too scared to tell you herself. She's been out looking for her—everybody has. They found the door of the tunnel undone, but Alfonse says she ain't been down there."

"And what about that young cub?"

"He's still here. Paul caught him trying to get into your room and soaked him. He's back where he was."

The Count moved swiftly. "All right," he grated, giving me a dirty look. "I'll attend to you when we get your partner here." Then, to the others, "Get him upstairs."

Resistance would have been merely suicidal. There was no melodramatic waving of guns, but I know that they weren't far away, so obediently I accepted Constantino's crisp invitation to accompany him, and up the stairs we went. Five flights we ascended before we turned down a short corridor. A door was open. I went inside and it slammed behind me.

I made straight for the window and looked out. It was a sheer drop of fifty or sixty feet to the gravel drive in front of the house, and as if that were not enough, five or six dark shapes slinking furtively across it warned me that should I attempt to escape, the actual descent, even if it were possible, would only be the beginning of my troubles. Wondering what to do about it, I struck a match and lit the gas. There was no electric light. Then I took stock of my surroundings, which can only be described as primitive. There was a small, cheap-looking, single iron bedstead set against the wall, a flimsy table with a basin on it and a bedroom chair. Nothing else. The chair did not look any too safe, so I sat down on the bed to run over the position in my mind. It didn't take very long. Steeley, presumably, was still down at the ruins, no doubt impatiently awaiting my return with Wayne unless, as seemed just possible, Helene had gone back and told him what had happened. She had certainly been left behind in the car. Brian was somewhere in the house, but I hadn't the remotest idea where, although the

likeliest place was in one of the towers, possibly the one I was in myself. If only I could get in touch with him!

I examined the door, but it was solidly built and I could see that nothing short of an axe would shift it. That left only the window as a means of escape, and although it seemed to offer no possibilities whatever, I went back to have another look at it. Curiously enough, I had developed quite a superiority complex where the Count and his minions were concerned, and I was not particularly afraid of any of them.

For a minute or two I stared down at the gravel drive. It looked a terrifying drop. Then it occurred to me to look upwards, and what I saw gave me a glimmer of hope, although it also gave me a sinking feeling in the stomach. I was in the top story of the tower. Two or three feet above my head an ornamental ledge—a string-course, is, I think, the technical name—ran right round the tower, or, at least, as far as my eyes could follow it. It projected two or three inches, so that I could just see the embattled, stone-coped wall rising a foot or two above it. There was no question of climbing up by it—that was clearly impossible; but it seemed that by taking my courage literally in both hands, there was just a chance that I might be able to work my way along to the next window, the sill of which I could see. The distance was ten or twelve feet. There was no light coming from it, so it seemed reasonable to suppose that it was unoccupied. Could I reach it? Dare I risk it?

No one except a cat burglar or a madman would have attempted it in cold blood, and the Count must have felt that way about it himself, or he would have barred the window, but I was not in cold blood. Every instinct told me that once the Count had got us together—Steeley, Brian, and myself—we should have very short shrift, and I fancy it was this knowledge that made me attempt the seemingly impossible. Climbing out on to the narrow stone sill, I drew myself slowly upright until I could hook my fingers over the ledge above. Very gently I tried my weight on it. It held, and I was relieved to find that it was of solid stone, like the rest of its surroundings, let into the actual structure, and not merely a plaster effect stuck on the outside. In the days in which the Towers had been built, the speculative jerry builder had not come into existence.

Gingerly I moved my feet along to the end of the sill nearest to my objective, and again tested my weight on the ledge; it felt as firm as a rock, so provided there was not a flaw in the material, and my strength held, the hazard was not so desperate as I had first imagined it would be. Taking care to keep my eyes turned upwards, I swung myself clear, and set off on the short but perilous journey.

It took me less than half a minute to get across, but I wouldn't do it again for all the tea in China. Not that it was particularly difficult. Ten feet from the ground one might have done it half a dozen times for fun; it was the knowledge of the void underneath that made the perspiration break out on my face and set my knees trembling as I stood poised precariously on the narrow foothold provided by the sill of my objective. Keeping my balance by holding the ledge with my left hand, I felt down with the right. The window was shut.

The horror of the thought that I might have to go back the way I had come was nearly my undoing, for all the strength seemed to ebb out of me. So much so, in fact, that my fear of what was inside the house became negligible compared with my fear of falling, and regardless of the noise, I put my foot through the glass.

A low growl from the depths warned me that this procedure did not meet with the approval of the watchers on the gravel but I cared little about that. Again I groped with my right hand, and although I cut it in the process, I managed to get the window open. Very slowly I knelt down and then, with a gasp of relief, slithered inside.

For a moment or two, with my heart pounding in my ears, I stood still, listening, trying to make out the details of the furniture, but it was all very vague, so after wiping the perspiration from my face with my sleeve, I made my way cautiously to where I imagined the door would be. It was some minutes before I found it, for I did not want to strike a match unless it became absolutely imperative, but on the other hand I was fearful of knocking something over and making a noise. So I kept myself well in hand and moved much as I suppose a burglar moves when at work in an occupied house.

In the end I found the door, and to my infinite relief ascertained that it was unlocked. All the time I had been looking for it the fear that it would be locked had weighed heavily upon me. Not that I would have gone back along that ghastly ledge in any case; rather would I await discovery where I was.

Very gently I turned the handle of the door and opened it a fraction of an inch. Instantly, a long thin shaft of yellow light cut across the darkness of my room, and simultaneously as I realised that the corridor was lighted, there was a soft footfall outside, and somebody walked past within a foot of me. Who it was I did not know, for the figure had flashed across my narrow field of vision far too unexpectedly, and too swiftly, for me to recognise it. But this much my racing brain appreciated. Whoever it was would, for the

moment, having passed the door, have his back towards me, and I snatched a quick peep outside.

Snatched is the right word, for I was back again inside the room faster than I had ever moved in my life, for with a gun held in his left hand, and a bunch of keys in the other, unlocking the door of my room, was the second of the two strangers who had been in the car.

Knowing that the discovery of my escape was now only a matter of moments, I realised that if my effort was not to be wasted I should have to do something quickly, and the knowledge made me desperate. Nevertheless I was not sufficiently desperate to tackle an armed man with my bare hands. Closing the door of my room, but without locking it, I struck a match and looked around for a weapon. There was only one thing that would serve; it fell far short of what I would have liked, but it was better than nothing. On the mantelpiece stood an old-fashioned white china candlestick. My fingers closed over the top end of it just as the match went out, and I got back to the door just as the fellow who had been to my room hurried past, evidently on his way to give the alarm.

There was little time to think. In fact, I am by no means sure that I did think, but merely followed an age-old instinct of self-preservation. In a flash I was out of the door. Three swift steps and I was behind my quarry. Quiet as I had been, he had heard me coming, and started to turn, but he was too late. With a crash that sounded as if it must be heard all over the house, the candlestick went to pieces as I brought the end down fairly on his head. His skull must have been pretty tough, for he by no means went down like the proverbial pole-axed bullock, as, according to established film technique, he should have done. But the blow dazed him, and he staggered against the wall with his hands to his head. The keys and the pistol fell to the floor. Before he could recover I had snatched up the pistol, put it in my pocket, and then landed him one with all my weight behind it right in the pit of the stomach. That finished the job—at least, temporarily. He gave a convulsive gasp—as well he might—and flopped down on the floor like a wet sack. As quickly as I could, I dragged him by the collar of his coat into the room I had just vacated, and there, having neither the time or inclination for the orthodox binding and gagging business, I left him. I waited only to lock the door, and then set off down the corridor.

Being in the tower there were not many rooms. Four, to be precise. Two I had already been in. The third one was open and empty, but the last one was locked. It took me only a few seconds to find the right key. I pushed the door open. The room was in darkness.

“Anyone in?” I asked.

“Good God!” gasped an amazed voice. The speaker was Brian.

CHAPTER XX

I STRUCK a match, and as it flared up I saw him facing me. He was clearly in a bad way, and his appearance gave me rather a nasty shock. His face was colourless except for a splash of blood across the forehead; one eye was purple, and nearly closed, while unkempt hair and three or four days’ growth of beard on his chin did nothing to improve matters. But he was, at least, on his feet.

“They told me you’d been bumped off,” he said, staring at me.

“That was a lie. They told me you’d been soaked.”

“There was no lie about that, believe me. I’ve just been praying that they’d leave me alive long enough to get my hands on the skunk who beat me up. Do you know what’s happened to Helene—I mean the girl——”

“She’s O.K.,” I broke in quickly. “Come on, we can’t stand talking here. Steeley is outside, but unfortunately he doesn’t know that I’m inside. Meanwhile, the place is swarming with thugs. We’ve got a tough proposition in front of us if we’re going to get out. What the hell made you go back after you’d got clear with Helene?”

“You’ve spoken to her, then?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” he promised. “Let’s get out. Have you got a gun on you?”

“Yes; I picked one up outside not a minute ago.”

“Good!” Brian looked around, apparently for a weapon, but there was nothing that could be used as one.

“Perhaps you’ll be able to find something downstairs?” I suggested.

“Did Helene tell you about the tunnel?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know where the entrance is.”

“I’ll show you. We shall have to go that way. It’s easier to get out of a condemned cell than out of this place; I’ve tried it, and I know.”

Without any particular caution, but with nerves on the jump—or, at least, as far as I was concerned—we hurried downstairs, seeing no one. In fact, the

house seemed strangely quiet. At the top of the last flight of stairs which led down into the hall Brian hesitated.

"If anyone tries to stop us, plug him," he grated belligerently. "I'm sick of messing about, and anyway, its our only chance. This way."

Quickly but silently we ran down the stairs. A swift glance at the Count's door, and we were across the hall and had entered what appeared to be, judging from the various hats and coats that hung on the walls, a sort of cloakroom. At the far side, fitted into a recess, was a tall wardrobe. Three quick strides and Brian had thrown it open and was pressing sideways against the woodwork at the back. It slid away, disclosing a narrow black aperture.

"Lucky it's open," he said. "I half expected to find it locked."

"Yes, it ought to be, I think," I muttered, trying to recall exactly what Lucien had told the Count about it being found open. "It looks to me as if someone might be in there already," I said doubtfully.

"Can't help that," declared Brian harshly. "It's useless to try to get out through the door. An electrical contrivance controlled by a main switch keeps the doors and windows sealed by some sort of magnetism when the Count is at home. Helene told me. You'd better go first, or else give me the gun. Mind the steps."

"I don't think a lot of this," I said anxiously, feeling my way to the bottom of a short flight of steps. "There aren't any holes or anything——"

"No, I don't think so. It's a perfectly straight passage, I believe."

"I'd rather you were sure about it," I answered grimly.

I gave Brian my matches, telling him to strike one from time to time, which he did, and in this way we made good progress.

In spite of what he had said about the tunnel being straight, it seemed to me to be all the time on a slight bend, which may account for the fact that whoever was coming the other way did not see us, or we them, until we were fairly close to each other.

I was feeling my way by the slimy wall during an interval of darkness when, without warning, a match flared up ahead. It was extinguished again almost immediately, and I could hear someone groping along the wall in much the same way as I had a moment before. Cursing under my breath, I stopped dead, undecided whether to go on, stand still, or go back.

Brian settled the problem. "We'd better go back," he breathed. "We'll get him as he comes out into the cupboard."

For a moment longer I hesitated, Brian's sepulchral whisper still echoing in my ears. There was no other sound. Whoever else was in the tunnel had stopped, or else he was moving with extraordinary stealth. It was a ghastly moment. The darkness was so intense that I found it difficult to keep my balance. Turning about, I put the gun into my pocket, so that I could still feel my way by the wall, and started to retrace my steps, sensing that Brian was somewhere close to me.

Almost at once I heard a sound behind me as if someone had stumbled, or kicked a piece of loose stone. It was sufficient to cause me to quicken my steps; indeed, thereafter the progress became something in the nature of a mild panic.

Brian reached the entrance first, and the flood of light as he pushed the door open almost blinded me. Possibly he was affected in the same way, which may account for the fact that neither of us saw Constantino until he spoke. He was still wearing female attire.

"Stick 'em up," he snapped.

At first I couldn't see a thing, much less make out where the voice came from, but when my eyes became accustomed to the glare I made out the speaker standing almost entirely concealed behind a heavy overcoat against the far wall. His feet, one eye, one arm, and an automatic only were exposed. Brian's hands went up. So did mine. The gun was covering both of us in turn, and at a range of less than three yards it would be next to impossible for him to miss. To draw my own weapon from my pocket, and use it, before Constantino could use his, was obviously impossible, and sick as I was at the situation, I had the sense to realise it.

Constantino stepped out of his place of concealment and eyed us with bitter hatred, in which there was a certain quality of unpleasant satisfaction. "If the Count wasn't at home I should plug you without the slightest compunction," he sneered. "But as he is, and as he may want to speak to you —first, it is a pleasure that will have to be postponed."

"Put that gun down, Constantino!" The words were as cold and hard as cracking ice. The voice was Steeley's, and it came from somewhere behind us.

Constantino hesitated, and I could read from the expression on his face and the movement of his eyes what was passing in his mind. He was wondering if he could get to the door before the unseen speaker could shoot. That Steeley was also able to follow his line of thought was made clear by his next words.

"You can't do it," he said. "I shall shoot you if you try."

That he meant it there was no doubt whatever. The words carried absolute conviction, and everyone who heard them must have realised it.

"Drop your gun on the floor."

Constantino's hand opened and the pistol clattered on the boards.

"Pick it up, Tubby."

I stepped forward, picked up the weapon and handed it to Brian, at the same time taking my own gun from my pocket.

Steeley walked into the room, smiling, but slightly pale. His hands were empty. "Marvellous what a little bluff will do, isn't it?" he said simply.

Constantino started forward with a vicious curse, but Brian and I had our guns on him in a flash, and he stopped, his hands clenching and unclenching in impotent fury.

"The next question is, what are we going to do with him?" said Steeley quietly, half to himself.

"Leave him. Let's get out down the passage," I suggested.

"Unfortunately we can't do that, because the Count and quite a large party of thugs are now coming along it in this direction," said Steeley coolly. "I saw them at the far end. They'll be here in a moment."

Subconsciously I had been aware of a confused murmur of voices, but now that Steeley had called definite attention to it, I realised that he was speaking the literal truth. Constantino realised it, too, and he did what, in the circumstances, was rather a plucky thing. At the top of his voice he shouted something in a language unknown to me—Greek, probably.

Steeley sprang forward. His fist shot out. It took Constantino on the point of the jaw and sent him crashing into a corner. Dressed as he was in women's clothes, I don't think I could have done it; even as it was, I had half raised my voice in protest before I could fully appreciate the true position. But there was no false heroics about Steeley. Unfortunately the damage had been done, though, as running footsteps close at hand in the passage clearly indicated.

I think Steeley did the right thing. He saw at once, as indeed we all did, that if we stayed and fought it out there was certain to be bloodshed, in which case we could hardly hope to escape without a tragedy. Any advantage we had in holding the bridgehead—as it were—was more or less offset by the fact that the Count and his party could shoot from the darkness of the tunnel, while we should stand exposed in the light. To put the light out would, it is true, counterbalance that disadvantage, but it would also destroy

our one advantage, because we should not be able to see the entrance to the tunnel.

We ran through into the hall, and with one accord made for the front door, but a few seconds' investigation proved conclusively that what Brian had told me about it was only too true. It was built like the door of a safe, although it had been painted over, and grained to represent woodwork. Steeley worked furiously at it for a few moments, even to the extent of borrowing Brian's pistol and firing at the lock, but it was no use. We tried two windows, but they too seemed to be hermetically sealed and Steeley threw up his hands in despair.

We were crossing the hall to get to the back of the house when there was a rush of footsteps in the cloakroom.

"The lounge! The lounge! Get in the lounge!" cried Steeley, making a dash for it.

Constantino, who had evidently managed to borrow a gun, appeared and took a snapshot at me, but his aim was wild and the shot went wide. I returned the compliment, and sent a splinter of wood spinning from the door-post into his face. Before he had time to fire again I followed the others into the lounge, whereupon Steeley slammed the door.

"Keep clear of that bookcase," he said in a tense voice, eyeing the massive fixture apprehensively, and I was glad of the reminder, for in the excitement of the moment I had forgotten about the hidden gun emplacement from which Bromfelt had been killed.

We all crossed over to the far wall out of the angle of fire from the sinister spot, and then stopped, no one apparently being quite sure of what to do next.

"I had an idea there was another door leading out of this room," muttered Steeley, "but I must be mistaken. Look out! The window——" He whipped up a chair and hurled it at the standard gas fitment which illuminated the room. It caught it fair and square, and with a frightful crash the whole thing went over, instantly plunging the room into darkness just as a shot blazed from one of the two tall windows that overlooked the drive. I felt the bullet whistle past my cheek. "That didn't touch you, Tubby, did it?" came Steeley's voice anxiously.

"No, but it was too close to be pleasant," I told him.

By mutual consent we lay down on the floor, taking advantage of any slight cover the furniture provided. There was a strong smell of acetylene, from which I gathered for the first time that the house was lighted from a private plant. In a moment or two, as our eyes became accustomed to the

darkness, it was possible to see the outlines of the windows, for it was lighter outside than it was inside.

"Can't be far short of dawn," I observed.

"Daylight won't help us much," was Steeley's cheerless answer.

"What were you doing in the tunnel?" I asked. "You promised you wouldn't go in——"

"I know, but while you were away I crept up to the Towers to have another look through the gate, and arrived just in time to see the Morris being driven in. That's how I knew they'd got you."

"As a matter of fact, I wasn't in it," I told him. "Things didn't fall out as you'd naturally suppose they had when you saw the car being driven in. Actually, I was hoping Helene had got away in it—but I'll tell you about that later on. What is more important, have you any ideas about getting out of this hell-hole?"

"No, I haven't," confessed Steeley frankly.

"What are they up to, do you think? They're surprisingly quiet."

"God knows! Nothing pleasant, you can bet your life on that," was the depressing reply. "I should say that the Count is getting very fed-up with us."

As if in answer to my question there came a murmur of voices, and the sound of footsteps outside the door, and I braced myself for a shock. It came, too, but not in the way I expected. First there was a heavy hammering on the door, and then a voice spoke.

"Come on out of that," it said harshly, but to me it sounded like the sweetest music, for the voice was Wayne's.

CHAPTER XXI

I HAVE heard of people being unable to believe their ears, and now I understood fully for the first time just what the expression meant.

Steeley was quickly on his feet. "O.K., Wayne," he cried cheerfully, crossing the room swiftly, and throwing open the door, allowing a stream of light to pour into the room. Framed in it was the detective, a massive army pattern revolver in his hand, two constables close behind him.

There was an awkward silence which lasted perhaps five seconds, while Wayne stared at Steeley with an extraordinary expression on his face, and then peered over his shoulder into the room. “What’s going on here?” he asked in a curious voice, as Brian and I stepped forward.

“We were just having a little argument with your benevolent friend, the Count,” answered Steeley cheerfully. “Where is he, by the way?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

“Well, all I can tell you is that five minutes ago he was outside this door with certain of his quick-fingered friends. You see, relations between us had got a bit strained, as you may notice,” explained Steeley, pointing to a bullet hole in the wall. “Hark! By Heavens! You’ll lose them yet,” he cried impatiently as the roar of an aero engine vibrated through the quiet air. As he spoke he started forward as if intending to give chase.

Wayne grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. “Don’t worry yourself about that,” he said calmly. “I’ve half a dozen men down on the aerodrome. They’ve got ’em, too,” he added quickly, as several pistol shots in quick succession reached our ears. “You stay here, I want to talk—hello! My God! What was that?” he jerked out.

“It’s time you knew the sound of an aeroplane crash,” said Steeley quietly. “A bad one, too, by the look of it,” he went on quickly, pointing to a small window at the far end of the hall, facing the rear, through which now came an ever-brightening red glow.

“Stay where you are, all of you,” snapped Wayne, in his best official manner, and he ran to the door, only to swear luridly when he found that he could not open it. Crossing the hall at a run he disappeared in the direction of what I imagine was the kitchen. For some time we heard him crashing about; then came the heavy boom of his revolver, thrice repeated; after that there was silence.

Feeling thoroughly worn out, I flopped down in a chair, put my feet up in another and went fast asleep. The last thing I remember was Brian doing the same thing while Steeley paced impatiently up and down smoking a cigarette.

Wan daylight was stealing through the windows when I was awakened by Wayne coming back noisily into the hall with several constables. His face was pale and streaked with black; one hand was bandaged; his jacket was torn in several places, and a great piece of material had been ripped clean out of his trousers. But for the gravity of his expression I should have laughed.

Without speaking he beckoned to us and walked through into the lounge we now knew so well. The atmosphere was pregnant with tragedy, which the silence, the disordered room, and the cold grey light of dawn did nothing to diminish. He went over to the decanter, poured himself out a stiff whisky, and took it neat, at a gulp.

"I suppose this stuff isn't poisoned?" he asked, half jokingly and half seriously.

"No," I said. "I'll have one myself, if you don't mind."

He didn't answer, but sat down heavily in one of the easy chairs, and for a little while regarded us reflectively. "About time we had a talk, eh?" he suggested.

Steeley nodded. "Be as well, I think," he agreed. "But first of all, do you mind telling me what's happened to the Count? Did you get him?"

"We've got what's left of him," answered Wayne grimly. "He tried to get away. Four of them, all together. They shot at my men who tried to stop them, and they returned the fire. Looks as if the fellow at the stick was hit, because the machine didn't make any attempt to get off; swung round, hit some wire, turned over, and then went up in flames before any of them could get clear. I expect they were trapped in the cabin. Identification looks like being a difficult matter."

"Good God!" I breathed.

"We tried to get them out, of course," continued Wayne. "That's how I got in this mess. Not this, though," he added, indicating the tear in his trousers. "I got through the kitchen window and forgot all about those blasted dogs until they came for me. I had to shoot three of 'em."

"Well," I observed, tritely perhaps, "no one can say that the Count and his crooked son have got more than they deserve. They sent other people out the same way."

"People?"

"Brance—Larkin—Bromfelt——"

Wayne started. "*Bromfelt!* I thought he was killed——"

"He was, in this room," interrupted Steeley. "Bromfelt was shot before he was burnt. We saw it happen. Exhume his body, and you'll find the bullet in it; and I think I shall be able to show you the weapon that fired it. In passing, I may say that that was one of the major pieces of evidence I was holding up my sleeve against the Count."

Again Wayne was silent for a minute or two. "All right," he said wearily. "But let us get this straight for a start. Which side have you fellows been

fighting on?”

“Considering what we’ve been through on your behalf, and at your invitation if it comes to that, I don’t think that question is very nice,” answered Steeley coldly.

Wayne shifted his feet uncomfortably. “What about that ‘snow’ business?” he asked accusingly.

“What about it?” retorted Steeley. “Your common sense ought to have told you that it was a put-up job. You’ve known me for a long time, Wayne, and you’ve seen both sides of the medal; honestly, do you think I’m the sort of fellow who would have any truck with a dirty racket like that?”

Again Wayne moved uncomfortably, and his cough was an apology in itself. “No,” he said shortly.

“That’s fine. We shall get on faster now that we understand each other,” announced Steeley approvingly. “As a matter of interest, where did you come from so opportunely?”

“Up that blasted drain-pipe.”

Steeley looked puzzled. “How did you know about it?”

“The girl told me. And she told me some more. Fairly took the blinkers off my eyes, so to speak.”

Brian, who I noticed had been waiting for an opportunity to say something, was on his feet with a bound. “Girl!” he cried. “Do you mean Helene—the Count’s daughter?”

“Of course.”

“About time somebody remembered her,” grumbled Brian. “From what I can see of it she saved our bacon.”

Steeley looked at me and flickered an eyelid. “How did she get to you?” he asked Wayne, “I assume you were at Sparling, but she couldn’t have walked all that distance in the time.”

“She stopped a fellow in a car and asked him to drive her to Sparling. She had heard you say that I might be there.”

“There you are, I knew she’d do the trick,” declared Brian hotly.

“All right, laddie, all right, nobody’s disputing it,” murmured Steeley gently.

“Where is she now?” Brian asked the Inspector.

“With a constable, down at that ruined church, or whatever it is. She had to come back with us to show us the way in. I think perhaps we’d better have her up here, and break the news gently about what’s happened.”

“I don’t think you need worry about breaking it gently,” rasped Brian. “The poor kid’s had a hell of a life with these thugs.”

Wayne nodded to one of the constables on duty at the door. “Go down and tell Gould to bring Miss Cortusoides along,” he said. “You can get out through the conservatory; that’s the way the Count went.”

“The thing is beginning to fit together,” observed Steeley thoughtfully, as soon as the constable had departed.

“You’d better start at the beginning; I’m still all at sea,” confessed Wayne.

Steeley stubbed his cigarette, lit another, and then looked at the Inspector. “You know, Wayne,” he began, “it may sound preposterous—indeed, I’m inclined to think it was preposterous—but call it a fluke, call it what you like, we knew within eighteen hours of your asking us to go into the matter of Brance’s death, not only how he had been killed, but who had killed him. We couldn’t prove it, of course, and, frankly, I rather doubted if we ever should.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” expostulated Wayne.

“I did. And what did you do? You immediately rang up the murderer and told him I was on his trail.”

Poor Wayne looked sheepish, as well he might. “All right, don’t rub it in,” he said. “Tell me how you got at it.”

Steeley told him the whole story, beginning with our discoveries—or rather, Steeley’s discoveries—on the site of Brance’s fatal crash. There were, of course, many gaps, some of which Brian was able to bridge, and others that could only be filled by conjecture.

The Count’s explanation of Brian’s absence was, it appeared, true in substance. The day we went to France he had managed, by getting on to the roof, to get into Helene’s room, and they had a heart-to-heart talk before they were discovered by Anna, her maid, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, her wardress, for she was virtually a prisoner. The Count, evidently realising that Helene must have told Brian a good deal more than he wanted him to know, locked him up in a room in the tower, where he had been all the time. The previous evening he had escaped again by working his way along the same ledge as I had used, and inspired now by something more than mere knight-errantry, had managed to reach Helene a second time. They fled, but finding it impossible to get out of the house by normal exits, she had told him of the existence of the tunnel. Then, instead of entering it with her, he had sent her on while he, suspecting that the Count was out, played for a grand slam.

I felt that he must have had a good reason for this, and my assumption was correct, for presently, with a mysterious smile, he invited us to accompany him upstairs. He went into two or three rooms before he found the one he sought, which was furnished luxuriously as a study.

"You've been in here before?" questioned Steeley.

"No, but I once had a squint through the window, while I was looking for Helene's room. The Count didn't know it, or I don't suppose I should be here now." Brian pointed to a long, horizontal panel which formed part of the rather ornate marble fireplace. "I don't know what's in it, nor do I know how to open it," he said, "but I know it does open, because the Count was putting something into it when I peeped through the window."

Wayne didn't waste time looking for the secret spring which obviously existed, and which, no doubt, would be hard to find. He sent a constable to fetch an axe from the woodshed at the back of the building, and with this he dealt the panel a smashing blow. It splintered like glass, disclosing a deep recess, and we all peered forward eagerly.

Wayne put down the axe and began to take things from the recess, putting them on the table, a slow smile spreading over his face as he did so. He had good cause to smile. Bundles of notes, sovereigns, jewellery, books, it was an intriguing heap that began to form on the table. He opened a flat jewel case and smiled broadly at the contents. "I know a lady who'll be pleased to see *those* again—not to mention the insurance people," he observed with a chuckle. He picked up one of the books and turned over several pages. His face was a study when he looked back at us. "It looks as if I shall be here for some time," he said. "There's no need for you fellows to wait, if you want to get along. Keep in touch with me, though; there's bound to be some loose threads that we shall need your assistance to pull together. The Chief will want to have a talk with you, anyway."

"You know about the Club, I suppose?" said Steeley. "And the villa in France, and the cowshed——"

Wayne tapped the book significantly. "It seems to be all in here," he said blandly.

"Just a minute," I protested. "What *was* in the cowshed? Have you been there?"

The Inspector nodded. "We cleaned that up first thing, before we came up to the house," he replied. "There's a nice comfortable apartment there—leads out through the cornbin. And enough contraband to start a West End store. I suppose the Count didn't like the idea of keeping it in the house; maybe he was wise. Give me a ring at the Yard about seven o'clock; if I can

get away we'll have a bite together. By the way, there are three or four cars in the garage; you can borrow which one you like."

I turned to Steeley, and noticed for the first time that Brian had disappeared.

"Where's Brian?" I asked in surprise.

Steeley smiled. "I think he's gone to meet somebody," he said quietly. "Let's go and find him."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Murder by Air* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]